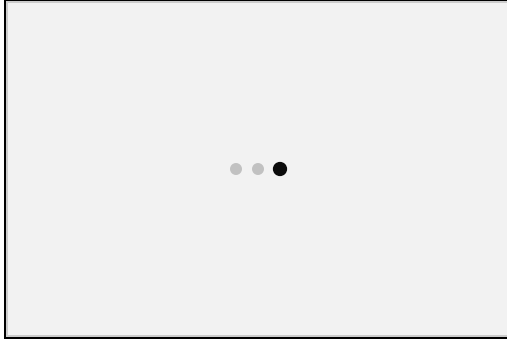


# The Prayer of the Poor

Rene Voillaume

## Chapter 1:



Flaubert at work; (Cameroon)

*They who loose their life...for the sake of the Gospel. ..will save it. (Mark 8:35)*

Having returned from a visit to the Holy Sepulchre, and while waiting to find out whether I am to get my permit to enter Israel tomorrow, I have come down here to pray in the dark, deserted silence of the sanctuary of Gethsemane. Each time I find myself

either at the Holy Sepulchre or here in the Garden of Olives, I feel actually obsessed by the mission of prayer which is that of our fraternities, its importance for each Little Brother and Sister.

In my letter from Mar-Elias I have already commented on how our prayer, must be the prayer of the poor, of those who strain and suffer. Yet, I cannot refrain from returning to the subject: I have something more to say to you tonight.

I have just seen the Little Brothers in Lebanon. I left two of them in the small, poor village of Hmoud, on the outskirts of El-Kerak, the capital of the southern part of Trans-Jordan. There they are starting out, empty-handed, to give themselves to the rough, semi-nomadic peasants of the land of Moab. In Beirut, some Little Sisters are settling in two miserable little rooms with corrugated sheet-iron roofs, inside a courtyard inhabited by poor Arab families whose houses are no better than theirs. The members of the nomad fraternity in the Sahara are not having an easy time either, watching their flocks and having no place to take refuge from the broiling summer sun than the smothering black wool tent they live in. I am also constantly thinking of the sailor Little Brothers during their long days of fishing and the nights when the sea rolls high; of those of you whom the Lord has led to the people of sub-Saharan Africa, or to the "callampa" on the outskirts of Santiago in Chile.

I feel certain Jesus means to conduct his Little Brothers more and more into the very heart of the most forsaken and despised masses of humankind. You are already feeling the reality of it. And you will carry more of their burdens, their ups and downs, each day, while even now

persons in distress, who can find no meaning in their lives, no way out of their misery, come seeking you, both yourselves personally and the warmth and cheer of your communities.

Here in Jerusalem, where the Savior died for having loved humankind to the end, I have received letters from several of you. You tell me again of the recurring, seemingly insoluble difficulties the sincerity of your charity keeps getting you into. I understand just what you mean. Remember how I already warned you that you would have to rise to the level of heroism sometimes in the exercise of charity. But you must also be able to maintain those conditions necessary for that deeper life you wish to live together, including those which allow a minimum of intimacy among yourselves so that you can be united in heart and spirit, so as to better help each other serve your Master. There are also conditions which must exist for you to be faithful to your mission as "standing delegates to prayer." This evening it is more especially this, your prayer life, that I feel impelled to speak to you about again, so important does it seem to me at the point we have now reached.

A few moments ago, as I came up the path leading to the top of the Mount of Olives, I was thinking how the Apostles questioned the Master on prayer. And now it is almost as if I were feeling all your difficulties myself. It is as if I could hear your voices as you confess your troubles and your fears, both for the present and for the future, owing to the circumstances and conditions you have to pray under.

## **Chapter 2:**

Night is coming on. I can hardly see now as I sit by the rock of the Agony. Even in broad daylight, the sombre purplish stained-glass windows give almost no light at all. It is so dark that one is compelled to pray without the help of a book, to pray with one's naked being, to pray with the whole of oneself just as one is... But a thoughtful Franciscan Brother has just brought me a candle, so now I can go on with my letter.

I have many things to say to you about prayer, but they are things which are very difficult to express. To enable you to grasp realities like these, something more than my words would be desirable. I know that only too well. It would take personal experience, that which the Spirit of Jesus alone can give, through secret intuitions. Even the words that came from the Lord's own lips were not enough to complete the apostles' apprenticeship in prayer.

I am thinking of what happened on this very spot, how, after two years of living with the Master of prayer, the best among the apostles were still incapable of "watching" with him "even for an hour." For "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." Since you know you too have been chosen by him, is that not the first thing to remind yourself of? Indeed, how could I allow myself to think that any teaching of mine could do more for you than Jesus's own words?

What I nevertheless must do is show you how to find the road along which God can then lead you. The heaviness, the helplessness you sometimes feel when you try to pray make you wonder whether there is not some extraordinary method which, could you only find it, would put you on the right road at last. I do not believe there is any such method. And if there were, it could certainly not be at variance with what the Lord has already told us in the Gospel. Jesus was and indeed will always remain, the supreme Master of prayer, not only because of what he knew, but because he prayed better than anyone had ever prayed before him or has ever prayed since. In other words, Jesus lived perfect prayer, and that in the midst of a life which was particularly harassing and sometimes almost overpowering.

The ultimate reason why Jesus must be the master of your prayer, however, is that he alone can put into your minds, your memories, and your hearts the true spirit of prayer, that gratuitous gift of love. No one ever knows how to pray until Jesus himself has taught that person from within.

Each time the Gospel notes that Jesus wished to have some of his apostles go off and pray with him, it also notes that they went to sleep. Yet they had been specially selected on each occasion. On Mount Tabor, while their Master was conversing with Moses and Elijah about his approaching death,

*"Peter and his companions were sunk in sleep" (Luke 9:32)*

At Gethsemane,

*"He went back and found them asleep; and he said to Peter: 'Simon, are you sleeping? Did you not have the strength to watch even for an hour?'... And when he returned, once more he found them asleep, so heavy their eyelids were; and they did not know what answer to make to him" (Mark 14.37-40).*

But Jesus became neither impatient nor discouraged. Why should we become discouraged then? The apostles were strong, rugged men who, for instance, often had to do their fishing by night and were therefore accustomed to catching up on their sleep as they could. And who of us, in the utter weariness of our working life, has never known our body to take its revenge on our spirit in this way? Why, one simply drops off to sleep all of a sudden, anywhere one happens to be. I imagine the Lord himself may well have sometimes made up during the day for the nights when he had been too besieged by visitors to be able to sleep enough, or when he had gotten up to pray too early in the morning. During the crossing of the sea in bad weather recounted in St. Mark, was he not "in the stern, asleep on the pillow there" (Mark 4: 38)?

I remind you of these things because they put us full into the reality of the Gospel atmosphere, and we are then more at ease approaching the problem of prayer in our life as Little Brothers. There is really very little to worry about here. Jesus, in spite of it all, succeeded in finding the way to work upon his apostles' hearts enough for them to be able to learn how to pray.

Yet it is not to be concluded from this that you have nothing else to do but wait for the Spirit of Jesus to visit you. You must go to meet the Spirit, you must "fight your way in at the narrow door." You must "fight your way" in prayer and, at the same time, await the Lord, if you are to really pray. There is nothing contradictory about this. Except when the Lord does come and do everything himself, you must make room in you for two different but equally necessary realities: hope of his visit (and this hope must be humble and ceaselessly renewed) and expectancy of his visit (and this must be effortful). Let me now explain a little what I mean.

## Chapter 3:

The problem seems to boil down to this. How are you to meet the conditions requisite to authentic prayer in your working life, and how are you to engage in it generously? This is your constant concern. You may even, at times, have believed it impossible. Face to face with the problem in all its gravity, I confess that at times I too have felt that I was at the start of an unfamiliar and terribly narrow and dangerous road. I have wondered whether I had any right to urge you upon it. But I knew I could not do otherwise. Experience, our own, but still more that of the saints, and the Lord's word in the Gospel, plus the sense of the Church's tradition with regard to prayer, were there to assist my reflection and give me assurance. What I have to say to you now I can therefore say with a feeling of complete security. The steepest roads are often the best and quickest: the traveller is less inclined to loiter on the way up. Such, I believe, is the road which Jesus wishes to see his Little Brothers climbing.

In my letter from Mar-Elias I pointed out that one of the chief objections people made to our kind of life was that the noise and fatigue that go with it, and the mental fatigue resulting from the long, hard, physical effort, would seem to remove all possibility of our having a genuine prayer life. I also said I would have more to say to you on this point, it is too important. It is important for you, but also for the millions of poor, the millions of workers who, in order to live, are obliged to subject themselves to work which often weighs on them too heavily.

I knew there had to be an answer to this objection. God was clearly pushing us toward a more complete sharing of the lot of the poor, while at the same time giving us a deeper sense of our vocation to prayer. Then, too, consulting the Gospel, it certainly did not seem that Jesus had ever wished to make prayer something rare, something reserved to people with enough leisure and quiet to be free to, say, indulge in preparatory meditation. That was hardly what he meant when he said.,

*"Come to me, all you that labor and are burdened...and you shall find rest for your souls"*  
(Matthew 11: 28-30).

Yes, we must accept the fact: when the time for prayer comes we will most often be incapable of meditating, incapable of really thinking. There must therefore be some other way for us to meet God in prayer.

Now, let it be perfectly clear that, over a certain length of time (longer for some, shorter for others), our dialogue with God will normally and properly begin with an exchange in which ideas, imagination, and emotions will all play a part. After that, however, the dialogue must progress toward a place within us which lies well beyond the senses, beyond mental images and thought.

You must never, at any stage, be afraid of simplifying, nor of meeting God as you actually are. During the beginning period of your prayer life, a period which may last for some time, just open your Gospel, for instance, or your Old Testament, not so much for the purpose of meditating on the divine words as simply to "be" there under their light, slowly reading and re-reading a few verses without trying either to analyse or discuss them with yourselves.

Or you may wish to vary by reciting silently, and equally slowly, the Our Father or the Hail Mary or some other prayer, letting the words sink into you one by one. I cannot help thinking, as I write this, of the rhythmical repetition of the "Jesus Prayer" which our brothers and sisters of the East have been so fond of using for so many centuries.

All this is simple, and easily compatible with the fatigue of your long days of hard work. You will also find it helpful to return to these "beginning" practices from time to time all along the road.

On the other hand, never allow yourselves to become dependent upon any means or method. The way we must go to God is with our entire being, as best we can. We go to him, first of all, through all those human activities which are made "supernatural" by the presence of grace within us. But even before that, and this becomes truer the farther we advance, we are carried into him by the living faith, the living hope, and the living charity within you are going to need a great deal of courage. You must therefore know that acting out these virtues in no way depends on how we feel when we do it, on any sense of "consolation" it might give us. It is enough for us to know that we are children of God, and to be certain that we will to give ourselves to God. The best part of us is not the part we feel. We are inclined to forget this. Certainly our thoughts, our acts of will, and our feelings can help us to be conscious of ourselves. But our nature as God's children is beyond our perception. Indeed, which of our faculties would enable us to see the imprint of our baptism, or to touch the reality of the divine life within us? "Religious emotions" take place nearer the surface, and they have other causes than the sensible consciousness of our being as a child of God.

It is by moving in this other direction that you will be able to arrive at a lively exercise of faith, hope, and charity. And this is already very true prayer, stripped almost beyond essentials, as it were. The Lord may then come and complete his mercies in you himself. For you are not to imagine that such divine action can be prevented by your leading the life of the poor. It is quite to the contrary for you, for whom that kind of life is precisely your vocation. The monotonous, hard daily toil can leave God more immediately free to act in you

(in the measure of your faithfulness), if he so wills. It can make it easier for him to carry you along in the movement of his own love.

It is unnecessary that you feel this going on. Prayer is never more real, never deeper, than when it occurs beyond the field of our sensible consciousness. Those who really pray lose sight of themselves and look only in the direction of God— with a gaze of pure faith, hope, and love, unconsolated by anything sensible, and often without any feeling whatsoever. We must be firmly convinced of this if we are to envisage the evolution of our prayer life with confidence.

In fact, it is when confidence seems to be lacking, when there seems to be nothing for us to lean on, that we begin to be active on that plane which is truly divine. It is when we think things are taking a bad turn for us that our inner lives at last start taking the shape which God wishes. When we go on in sheer faith; when we simply "hold on" before the Blessed Sacrament without knowing too well either how or why; when we place ourselves at the service of others without feeling any desire to do so, with nothing appealing to us in it; when the words of the Gospel or the Liturgy seem bereft of all power to move or attract, then it is (if we have been faithful and if God so wishes) that the mystery of faith is accomplished in us, and we begin to enter the region of our souls where divine life flows. From this perspective, and from this perspective alone, once we are properly convinced of the truth of it, we can fruitfully reflect upon the problem of prayer.

Meditation, then, is not prayer. At the most, meditation can be a preparation for prayer, and for some, the way in. The road God offers us is the one we should desire. We must pray as it is possible for us to pray and not worry ourselves by trying to pray in a way which cannot be ours. I do not mean that meditation has no part to play for us. I shall come back to the subject in a moment. I only mean that meditation and prayer are two different things, and that meditation is not even essential as a preparation for prayer when God assigns us another road. And there is another road.

Moreover, meditation can sometimes become an obstacle to prayer, a screen between God and us, a road so easy that one is inclined to tarry on it. It takes effort to leave the wide open road for one that is a steep climb. Yet nothing else will do.

## **Chapter 4:**

God (we must be convinced of this by now) can only come to meet us in the measure in which our love is real; and we can only find the realness of love on the road of pure faith; and the road of pure faith passes through that dark region where reason and feelings are reduced to their true dimensions, and "put in their place." Now, such a reduction, such a "stripping down," is required not only by the very nature of purification, but also by the Lord's usual manner of acting since he cannot come near us without our being touched by the fire of his agony and his cross. Those who approach prayer by way of meditation inevitably have to reach this same point, and if they remain faithful, the Holy Spirit will come at the appointed

hour and break up the too reasonable, too rational arrangement of their "spiritual life." He will make all meditation impossible for them, so there will be nothing they can do but force their wills in the direction of God alone, beyond all thought and all feeling. For feeling is not prayer any more than meditation is. Feeling is inconstant, and it is only useful to beginners in helping to prime and train the upward movement of their wills. For love, true love, resides in the will.

It must be our absolutely firm conviction that the true part of prayer, the way to union with God, lies beyond feeling and beyond words and ideas. People's idea of prayer is often too small: it is neither real enough nor elevated enough. They do not really believe, not enough, at least, that God himself can come and make their prayer in them. Or else, when they do believe this is possible, they are inclined to think it can only succeed with a small number of people separated from the world, those whom the cloister provides with a framework of silence favorable to meditation.

But why should this be so? Are those who are prevented from meditating by the conditions they live in likewise prevented from praying? Is prayer, then, not above reflection? There is no meditating for the poor. Their minds are elsewhere, they do not have the necessary culture, they have no knowledge of the mechanism of meditation, or else they are too weary. Sharing the lives of the workers as you do, you must also share their way of praying. Your minds are no more ready for meditation than theirs when you come in half deafened by the noise of the machines in your factory, with your backs half broken from your work at the bottom of your mine, with your heads bursting from your long hours of farm work in the sun, giddy from the chemical fumes in your rayon shop, or heavy with sleep after your trawling expedition. How can you meditate? You cannot.

But, if you have the courage and are persistent enough, you can do this: with the simplest, plainest acts of faith and love, you can place yourselves before God, open your being to him, down to the bottom and just as you are, and await him there. There will be expectancy, joined to desire for his coming, and above all awareness of your powerlessness, your misery, and the insufficiency of your courage. The result will often be a painful prayer, a confused and muddled prayer, a prayer none too spiritual as far as appearances go. Yet the hunger for God, the hope of his coming which is always there in our depths, will be conveyed by the effort of your faith and the upright attitude of your bodies. For your wills will be praying, or at least desiring prayer and asking for prayer. On certain days, slender material like this will be all you have to present, and it will be for God to make out of it true prayer and a means of union with him.

You may have to use patience, and keep prodding your perseverance, despite your state of numbness or dullness or emptiness. For some of you such continual alertness in so greatly simplified an exercise of the theological virtues may have to last all your lives. Only God himself, who leads you as he thinks best, can tell. But you can indeed you must, all of you ask the Lord incessantly (and of course, humbly) to complete this meagre gift by coming and himself saying in you the ineffable prayer which he alone can say to the Father.

If you bring him your hunger and your hope of his visit, faint and subdued as it may the more often be, hardly recognizable for a prayer as it may seem to you—God can use it as a privileged means for true purification of the mind and the senses, and so lead you to divine union. I can also assure you that in the hard physical life you have adopted, there can be very true union under forms so simple—I might almost say banal—that it will not always be necessary for you to make the distinction.

This conviction must go to the bottom of your hearts. You must believe in such a road; believe that it is a shortcut to union with God in pure faith; believe that God will come and make your prayer for you without your necessarily being aware of it. If one fails to accustom oneself to the idea of formless prayer, it is because one does not believe this enough. And yet God's friends, the saints, have all been through it.

Indeed, if we will only recognize it, we well know that, in the end, when Christ does come into the souls of those who have faithfully desired and awaited him, the meeting has been conditional upon only one thing: the generosity of a person's faith and love. Of course everything here is the Lord's free gift, and he bestows it as he wishes. But even so, his promise remains:

*"If anyone loves me, he will be true to my word; and then he will win my Father's love, and we will both come to him, and make our continual abode with him" (John 14.23).*

At the end of any process of evolution in prayer, all find themselves in one and the same mode of union with God, which is without form and without ideas. The routes will have been different, though the direction which the work God's Spirit takes is always the same in all. The route for the Little Brothers is different from that of religious and other persons living apart from the world; and again, for the greater number amongst us, it will not pass by meditation as a usual thing. Or, if it does pass by meditation, it will only be over a short distance: we shall quickly find ourselves constrained to get onto the more obscure road that is the absence of feelings and consolations and mental images, with everything this entails in the way of moments of "dryness" beyond our control, and inner emptiness. Our humble perseverance—humble, but nonetheless full of the desire of Love—will be an entreaty to God to step in and transform all this into a purification of our faith.

Such being our method of prayer, our life of work is not to be thought of as something inferior, an adversity for us to undergo. It is to be approached as something to be resolutely embraced as a privileged means of purification for us and, if God so wills, of introduction into the free gift of divine union. So let it be our desire to go straight into prayer of pure faith, though however painful. Our inability to meditate, though resulting from purely material external circumstances, can then become, under the divine action, a veritable passageway to this kind of prayer. The Lord's promise (remember the sons of Zebedee!) is nothing different. I am certain he accepts such a shortened itinerary where the poor are concerned. But in order to merit that acceptance, I think one must be humble and really little.

You may also put aside all fear of losing your way by this route. There is nothing to be afraid of, unless it is not persevering with enough courage. This, in fact, is the one essential condition. It is the one thing Jesus has demanded of us. There is something very remarkable



in the fact that, when one brings together all of Jesus's teachings on prayer, one finds that they contain practically only one recommendation: perseverance. He repeats and repeats, and keeps coming back to the subject with different parables, all bearing on the same theme—so much so that the discovery is almost disappointing! One would have expected something more "interesting" in the way of initiation! It all seems so rudimentary that one wonders at first whether there has not been some mistake. And some people remain convinced that this is in fact the case; they go looking elsewhere for "directions" that will better satisfy their curiosity or their taste for the complicated. The truth is too simple for them.

But people who react like this forget something, the Lord's recommendation to importunate perseverance, in an act he well knew would be so unappealing to our humanity, shows precisely that he means to do the rest himself.

*"Ask, and the gift will come; seek, and you shall find; knock, and the door shall be opened to you. Everyone who asks will receive; who seeks will find; who knocks will have the door opened" (Matthew 7.7-8).*

So let us not go searching about for other methods than the one the Master of prayer himself has indicated. I do not think we could do much better... If one can correctly say that the Gospel offers a "set of rules" for prayer, it is certainly the best set of rules for the prayer of the poor, for nothing is proposed there that is beyond their reach.

## **Chapter 5:**

The Gospel teaching on prayer can, then, be considered to be contained in two essential points, a promise that God will come to meet us when and as he wishes (this is God's share in the work, as far as we are concerned the greater share, for his promise will not be frustrated), and a pressing summons to perseverance, whatever happens and despite all adverse appearances (this is our share in the work). And what more do we need to know?

So, to learn how to pray, just pray. And pray a great deal, and make yourselves keep starting over again tirelessly, even if there is no response, even if there is no apparent result. Jesus stressed perseverance as he did because he knew how difficult it would be for us, owing to our need for novelty and change.

To help yourselves persevere, you will frequently have to recall the characteristics which prayer of pure faith habitually takes on.

Thus, do not wait to pray until the desire for it comes, or until you "feel like it." If you do this, you will find yourselves slipping just when you most need to pray. This is a most dangerous illusion, and one to which a great many people owe their estrangement from Christ. The desire for prayer can only come from faith; it is an effect of prayer, and not the other way around. It should be enough for you to realize that God is expecting you. God never stops wanting you to pray, even when you have no wish to do so—and perhaps even especially

then. Something never to forget is that the less you pray, the less well you will pray, and the less often you will desire it.

Of course, you must not look for any personal benefit from pure prayer. It is for God's sake that one must pray, and not to get satisfaction out of it, or to see how well one can pray, or how good one's method is. Nor should one wish for any other kind of prayer than the one God gives as one goes along.

I do not see in the Our Father, at least, in the first part of it, any request whose answer could bring any personal satisfaction, or even any immediately observable result; and that is the prayer which Jesus gave his disciples as a model. One must persevere without seeing. One must therefore be capable of always starting over with no "purpose," for no "reason" at all—for his sake. This amounts to saying that, if you are to succeed at all in praying this way, you will need a great deal of courage; and you will need even more in order to prolong your prayer and persevere in prayer. Father de Foucauld always asked for courage as something indispensable, and he was continually accusing himself of having too little of it.

Do not be diffident about taking with you into prayer (or of carrying away with you either) a feeling of aversion, or even revulsion, for your shortcomings or your weaknesses or your mistakes, in short, for your misery. Recall the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, and ask yourselves why the Lord's preference was for the latter, with his consciousness of his faults and his shyness. It is even probable that the more generous your prayer, the more acutely, the more overpoweringly, you will feel your shortcomings.

And what of it? What do you imagine you would stand to gain by trying to appear other than you really are before God, or by insisting upon being different with God in prayer from what he asks you to be? Be what you are, as you are. Refrain, too, from trying to make your prayer easier, or to make yourselves feel it, by using a book. You would probably be wasting your time. Your aim is simply to be really present before God, not through thought or imagination or feeling (these will wander waywardly sometimes, anyway), but through the desire of your wills, constantly re-focused. At times, the only way within your immediate power to express this intention—and yet it will still be very real, will be simply to remain physically present, on your knees, before the Tabernacle. And that will then suffice. The aspiration of your being towards God in silence is infinitely more than reading or meditating.

When one prays, one must be prepared to accept what prayer itself demands. You will therefore often have to go to prayer as to the cross. And this is much more deeply true than you may think, because it is precisely in prayer that you are associated with the work of redemption which was brought about on the cross. Go to prayer to "lose" yourselves, and then you will be certain of realizing the whole of the Lord's will for you. For

*"the one who tries to save his life will lose it; the one who loses his life for my sake will secure it" (Matthew 16:25).*

I can assure you that there is no truer method, nor one more in keeping with the Gospel. It will be impossible for you to go astray if you follow it. The vacuum of thought and feeling is nothing for you to recoil from, provided that, first, it has not been brought about artificially

by your own efforts; and second, you put into it your silent, courageous, perhaps painful, and in any case obscure, expectancy of the divine visit.

You must be capable of waiting for the meeting with God, all your life long if necessary, without ever ceasing to believe it will come, but beginning your wait afresh each day. That is exactly what it means to persevere in faith in the Lord's words, and to keep one's lamp filled with oil.

## Chapter 6:

Before bringing this letter to a close, I must say a word about the rhythm there must be in your lives.

All life in the visible universe that of plants no less than that of our bodies and spirits is rhythmic, and the two exercise and rest. Now, any life which has a settled direction is exposed to the danger of a break in its natural rhythm if one of these movements is used to excess, at the expense of the other. The divine life and the prayer life of a human being are equally subject to this law, with the same risks. The Fraternity manner of life therefore, mingled as it is with the insecurity and daily cares of the poor, has its own particular dangers, just as the life of the solitary or of the monk does. For us as workers, a certain numbness of the will can result from mental sluggishness, and the nervous balance necessary for self-control can be broken if we become overly tired. Likewise, the inner silence in the depths of our beings can finally give way under the strain of continual noise and commotion. So there must necessarily be moments of quiet reflection at regular intervals, reflection on faith, on the Gospel, and on ourselves, in order for us to make sure that we are harbouring no illusions with regard to what is going on inside us.

You therefore cannot dispense with periodic returns to physical quiet and rest and outer silence, especially in the working fraternities and in the service fraternities when we will have those. These are not only necessary for our life; they are vital to any human life. Jesus himself felt the need for them, and respected their demands. The three years of his public life were not only preceded by a retreat of forty days, but were also interspersed with moments when he would flee into the wilderness to pray in peace for a few hours or to give his apostles a few days of quiet.

At this point I must also remind you of the all-important commandment of weekly rest which God placed upon human beings at the outset. The "seventh day rest" is a rhythm so essential that God built it in, as it were, into the very fabric of his work of creation. It stands out as part of the creative action itself, and proceeds from it as a reflected image or imitation of it.

*"By the seventh day God had come to an end of making, and he rested on the seventh day, with his whole task accomplished. That is why God gave the seventh day his blessing, and hallowed it, because it was the day on which his divine activity of creation finished".*

*"Remember to keep the Sabbath day holy. Six days for drudgery, for doing all the work you have to do; when the seventh day comes, it is a day of rest, consecrated to the Lord your God... It was six days the Lord spent in making heaven and earth and sea and all that is in them; on the seventh day he rested, and that is why the Lord has blessed the seventh day, and hallowed it" (Exodus 20:8,11).*

*"... Be sure that you observe the Sabbath day. It is a sign between us that is to last all through the ages which lie before you, reminding you that I am the Lord, and you are set apart for me" (Exodus 31:12).*

When one reads these passages of the Bible, does one not immediately feel that there is a precept here which is particularly grave and sacred? The transgressor paid for his transgression with his life, as if he had attacked something fundamental to the human race. The resultant rhythm of rest is, then, likewise sacred. On the level of activity it contributes to the completion of a human being's resemblance to the divine. Indeed, human failure to observe this law entails a deterioration of the image of God within that person.

Humankind has pretty generally lost the sense of this law of God's. And if and when it happens that they discover the principle of the weekly rest, they no longer know how to live it as part of the divine image that they are. People do not know how to stop any more, so chained together have they let their activities become—and they with them. Indeed, how far are they still masters of their own activities? The Catholic world has not escaped the contagion. The most it retains in general is the material aspect of the Church's commandment, which it too often observes with sheer formalism, oblivious of the substance of the precept as the Creator proclaimed it. Yet the precept has never been withdrawn. It is still in force, with a fullness and clarity which the Church prescriptions were only meant to restate and emphasize, certainly not to reduce or abolish.

## **Chapter 7:**

So the regular alternation of activity and rest is a vital necessity for the body and for the soul, for work and for prayer; and God has made it a moral imperative. We are all more or less inclined to forget this. But it is not enough for God that we attend Mass on Sunday and refrain from so-called "servile" work, if we fill up the rest of the day with equally absorbing and exacting activities of other kinds. There is a spirit to the law which it is up to us to grasp. I wonder if we are still capable of submitting humbly to that aspect of the law which relates to physical rest and nervous relaxation (even if exteriorly nothing prevents us from observing it). Yet, disregard for so vital a law is something we pay for dearly.

You must therefore see that you respect the spirit of this divine precept better, especially those of you who are already working. A rhythm of periodic rest for both body and soul is an obligation binding on your consciences. And when it is actually impossible for you to arrange

your Sundays to meet this obligation, as it sometimes will in fact be, you must not consider yourselves relieved of God's demands, for they concern your very lives and not just your Sundays.

In the majority of countries there is now legislation providing for the weekly rest, but it has not always been easy for the working masses to gain their freedom to observe this rhythm, however essential to life it is. And there may be cases where you will have to fight to keep it.

Obviously, you are but poor men subject to the general conditions of workers, and it will not always be possible for you to observe the precept to the letter. You must nevertheless do everything you can in this direction—and I am not sure that so far this has always been the case. I am concerned when I think of you being caught up in the grind of modern life, where it is practically impossible for a person not only to stop and rest, but to avoid rushing from one activity to the next. Some of the Brothers will have to make a serious effort to learn to rest their bodies while submitting to the inescapable conditions of their modest position as manual workers.

Still more important than rest for the body (though it depends upon it) is the problem of the rhythm of the life of the soul. For it is for this reason that the day of rest is hallowed by God; and here the matter is one of our immediate relationship with him. Certain work schedules are incompatible with the development not only of a religious or priestly life, but with that of a merely Christian life. They allow altogether too little free time for the vital minimum of spiritual rest, silent prayer, and nourishment of one's faith by thought and reflection.

This is a fact only too well known to those of you who have experienced, say, the life of the deep-sea fisherman or the farmhand, where professional standards are either entirely lacking or fail to deal humanely with the matter of working hours. And you will remember how I have insisted on the necessity of your taking every step in your power to obtain, in occupations like these, the vital minimum of freedom for a human being and a Christian to breathe. This is true even if your workmates no longer feel the need for it, either because they have become too accustomed to getting along mechanically without it, or because they have lost all memory of a life of the spirit and its normal requirements.

It is necessary that the fraternities be present in these environments where people are more affected by physical exhaustion than in some others, more miserable without always knowing it, above all, farther from God—in those environments where, under present circumstances, Christians can no longer live a Christian life. They need the fraternities more than certain other places do. But we can only settle there definitively once we have secured recognition of the essential requirements of our prayer life. These are simply those that any person should demand, that every person has a right to claim. They go no farther than what any Christian should insist upon, for it is the duty of a Christian to fight for a rhythm of life compatible with Christian perfection. For us Little Brothers, these conditions are sufficient for us to live out our vocation, and we must therefore demand and stick to them with all firmness.

Concretely for us, this cycle of living spiritual respiration involves a half-day of silence, reading and prayer each week (preferably on Sunday morning) and a day of retreat and

recollection each month. This is not to mention the annual retreat, or the broader cycle of occasional lectures and discussion sessions, or visits at varying intervals to adoration fraternities once they will have been established.

I trust I have now emphasized this question of rhythm enough for you to grasp its full importance, especially the weekly and monthly rhythms. So use your energies and imaginations in observing it. The solution will often depend on the way you arrange your time. It can also depend on your finding a favourable spot to go to. Experience shows that the best thing is to get away from the fraternity entirely and go either somewhere outdoors, or to a church or monastery, or to the house of some friend where you can be sure of being quiet (I am thinking more especially here of the monthly retreat.)

It is the same for you as for the poor, working in too limited spaces, living in too narrow quarters, needing places of silence more than one might think, more than they often know themselves. In the midst of such conditions, monasteries can be veritable oases, provided that they are faithful to their vocation and function, and practise fraternal hospitality toward those who wish to turn to the quiet of their enclosure to be "re-created." It is furthermore a good thing for you to see for yourselves how necessary cloistered monasteries are for the proper functioning of the "spiritual lungs" of a Christian community.

You must be very firm about observing these periodic retreats. Your work and the demands of charity will of course sometimes prevent you from keeping to any strict schedule here, but the principle must remain solid. It will now and then happen, as it did with our Lord, that you will be literally pursued into your place of retreat and be obliged to sacrifice a day of peace and seclusion hardly before it begins. On these occasions, Jesus would patiently return from the wilderness and allow himself to be taken possession of again by the crowds. Yet this did not prevent him from seizing the next opportunity to flee back to the desert.

*"... at very early dawn, he left them, and went away to a lonely place, and began praying there. Simon and his companions went in search of him; and when they found him, they told him, 'Everyone is looking for you.'" (Mark 1:35-37).*

## **Chapter 8:**

The significance of this alternating course, by which you are obliged to pursue union with God in two diametrically opposed directions, requires your full and willing acceptance. On the one hand, you have your work days when, heavy with fatigue, pressed by those who need you, you will be reduced to prayer of that dark, formless and sometimes painful kind whose value for purification and union with God in pure faith I think you will now realize, given what I said above. On the other hand, you have your longer periods of withdrawal and silence when, owing to the contrast, you will very likely find yourselves psychologically unprepared, at least at the outset. And this is perfectly normal.

You will have to make a spiritual effort at thoughtful reading and deeper reflection on your faith. This faith will be truer for your being less tempted to seek enjoyment in it and inclined to stop at this step. With no transition to assist you it will likewise be more difficult for you to adjust to the outer silence, though this will not necessarily mean that you are lacking in either inner silence or inner generosity. Sometimes it will simply be a matter of your not feeling at home right away, and the effort you will have to make to overcome that reaction will give the outer silence you observe during these brief "flights into the wilderness" its full "filtering" capacity. Thus you will also be able to see how real the inner silence, which you have struggled to keep in the depth of your hearts in everyday life, has actually been.

In short, this constant changing from one kind of life to another acts as a guarantee of the authenticity of your lives as believers. By giving yourselves generously to both these forms of life, one after the other, without ever seeking to run away from the challenges both offer to our self-detachment and self-giving, you can avoid the risks inherent in both. And your faith, your prayer, your love of God and people will be safe from illusion.

As regards prayer more especially (since prayer is what I started out to write to you about tonight), whether during your hour of adoration at the end of your work day or in the silence of a retreat day, you must always expect that you will be coming to it under conditions that will require a real effort in faith.

Let me also stress again the value of what I might call the "work-and-expenditure" period of your life rhythm as a vehicle on the road to divine union. This is not a period during which you live off a supply of spiritual energy accumulated in the course of your retreat times, like a tank running out almost faster than it can be re-filled. Such an idea is radically false. It would amount to saying there can be no growth in love in a prayer life led with courage under difficult circumstances.

A live body is strengthened by exercise as well as by rest. These two factors are equally necessary to its well-being and development. But too much rest causes one to become weak, and too much exercise causes strain. Proper development depends on adequately alternating between the two. And so it is with living prayer. We are quite as much—and sometimes more—open to the sanctifying influence of God's Spirit in the state of self-emptying brought about by a courageous effort to pray at the end of a long and difficult day as we are, say, in the peaceful rest of a moment of meditative reading at the beginning of a day of silence. Both of these "movements," however, are required to ensure the growth of our generosity, and the balance of our life for God, beyond the realm of illusion.

*Mount of Olives, Jerusalem, 27th July, 1951*

\*Article is drawn from here:

<http://www.jesuscharitas.info/jcd/fr/4494/prayer-poor?page=0%2C0>