

Last week's article took up the topic of God speaking to us in our thoughts but that begs this question of: how do I know if it's something truly from God or if it's just my own desire, or the world, or the tempter himself? This question reflects the humility needed in prayer. It is a good start. Most of the time a person cannot have absolute certitude whether or not something that comes to them is really from God or not. But there are guidelines. The biggest qualification for something to be from God is that it cannot be inconsistent with what He has revealed and teaches definitively in and through His Church. I remember reading about some young Catholic woman who decided that she was called to be a priest and so she abandoned the Catholic faith and went to Anglicanism. This did not come from God.

Another guideline is: if it is a movement to repentance, it's almost certainly from our Lord. For one thing, that often doesn't feel good and my own desires are often trying to lead me to some sort of immediate good feeling; secondly, it's certainly not from a demon because that's the last thing he wants you to do; and finally, what St John the Apostle refers to as "the world" is an instrument of evil so it's not from there either. When is the last time you heard anything worldly that was calling you to repentance? But what lends the most certitude to this is that repentance, and a prolonged period of repentance, is the first substantial step to our Lord; everything else is preparation for this first stage of building relation with God, as clearly revealed by our Lord. So if your thought is sorrow for sin, contrition, repentance, a firm purpose of amendment, it's from our Lord. Now even here *some* care has to be taken because the demons will try to corrupt it. So you have to remember – our Lord is calling us to conversion, not despair – never to despair or any kind of discouragement. All such thoughts are temptations.

What was said for repentance can be said more generally of virtue. If I realize that I have lacked in fortitude or justice or any virtue somewhere and that leads me to want to rectify that, it's almost certainly from our Lord. We are also called to thanksgiving to, and adoration of, our Lord. So if your thought moves you in this way, it's almost certainly from God. If the great goodness of our Lord strikes you, for example, and it moves you to a humble gratitude to God, that's almost certainly from Him. Maybe I suddenly have a deeper and fuller awareness of our Lord's presence in the Eucharist, all such things come from God. That which leads to God is from God. Most thoughts or motives that involve self-sacrifice and self-denial will be from our Lord.

The most difficult discernment, though, is on choices between goods. Some of these will be easier than others. For example, choice of vocation. If the "thought" comes to you that you should be a priest, for example, and it just won't go away, that's probably the Lord calling you. Same thing with marriage, and to a particular person. The thing will just keep weighing on your mind. All of the things that have been discussed so far can generally be known to be from God (or not) with a very high degree of certitude. But there are other thoughts – like should I take a different job – that will not be so easy to discern and we will likely just have to settle for less certitude about them. The key is to set ourselves (my own desires and self-interest) aside as much as I possibly can and say to the Lord: your will be done. The more a person does this, the easier it will be to know our Lord's will in these kinds of things.

This brings us to one other thing – something already in the background in these discussions on prayer. Our Lord calls us to live an integrated life: participation in the sacraments, personal prayer, study of the faith, and living the faith in everyday life. These things all go together, they inform each other, they grow (or fall) together, they strengthen (or weaken) one another. St John of the Cross emphasizes this point as well. He begins with a quote from the Gospel of Mark: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mk 8:34). He then expounds on this as follows:

"Oh, that one might show us how to understand, practice, and experience what this counsel is which our Savior here gives us concerning the denial of ourselves... [T]rue spirituality seeks for God's sake that which is distasteful rather than that which is delectable; and inclines itself rather to suffering than to consolation; and desires to go without blessings [consolations] for God's sake rather than to possess them; and to endure aridities and afflictions rather than enjoy sweet communications, knowing that this is to follow Christ and to deny oneself...I wish, then, that I could convince spiritual persons that this road

to God consists not in a multiplicity of mediations nor in ways or methods of such, nor in consolations, although these things may in their way be necessary to beginners; but that it consists only in the one thing that is needful, which is the ability to deny oneself truly, according to that which is without and that which is within, giving oneself up to suffering for Christ's sake, and to total annihilation."

But then also consider this one, of many, quotes on prayer from St John of the Cross:

"Never give up prayer, and should you find dryness and difficulty, persevere in it for this very reason. God often desires to see what love your soul has, and love is not tried by ease and satisfaction."

John's main point in the first quote is, of course, the *necessity* of this self-denial and its supreme importance in having relation with God. What he is describing there is actually living out that strange and peculiar thing called love, the essence of relation with God. Notice that John of the Cross calls this "the one thing that is needful." How is that to be understood? Is he saying: that's it? Forget about real prayer? The second quote obviously rules that out. So how do we put these things together? He is saying, for one thing, that we have to live an integrated life. If, for example, I spend hours before our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament but then refuse to deny my own desires, or I'm always seeking comfort and consolation, then I have gained little if anything. My prayer should lead me to love. *Conversely*, if I don't pray, I won't and indeed cannot, follow this command of our Lord to deny myself, take up my cross, and follow Him. We must be cognizant of the fact that prayer is not an activity in isolation, it is not (in some sense) an end in itself, but is meant to liken me to Christ, to love in the way that God means it (Mk 8:34) and as described by St John of the Cross.

So this is one thing – it's not just "I pray" (supposedly) but I know what it means to follow our Lord (study of the faith) and I strive to live it (i.e., live out love = sacrifice of self). I cannot "pray" yet choose to glorify myself or continue to sin grievously and then think: well I'm good, I "prayed." These 4 things – personal prayer, the sacraments, study of the faith, and living the faith in everyday life – form a single whole. Notice also that in that first quote St John of the Cross is also bringing out the simplicity (and thus sincerity) of prayer. How easily one can leave or avoid true prayer by seeking out "special techniques" or over-objectifying it or insisting on some particular form. All of what has been said in this series of articles is emphasizing simplicity (freedom from duplicity).

My plan is to wrap up this series on prayer next week with a little summary. In the space left here, then, let us touch on another topic related to prayer, one brought out by the second quote from St John of the Cross – what's sometimes called dryness. Dryness means that I don't experience any sense of consolation or the presence of our Lord in prayer, I might even have a sense of an absence of God. I don't feel anything, maybe I don't even want to do it. Notice that John says that things like consolations might be needed for "beginners," i.e., as one really begins to enter into conversion. But as one progresses our Lord withdraws these consolations so as to purify our love of Him. Do I trust and persevere even when I don't *seem to be* receiving anything? Is that the only reason I "pray" so that I can receive something? Is my love conditional – I'll "love" as long as I get something sweet in return? I suppose there can be a multitude of causes of dryness – some of which might be my own fault. Distractions or sins that I've yielded to might be one, in which case it's not really that I'm experiencing dryness but rather than I'm not really praying. True dryness is a gift from God. Perseverance through dryness is the greater act of love, and one day we'll know it. In this life, we have to trust God to know and to do what is best for us. Dryness is something He permits to make us greater.

Distractions are also a common problem in prayer. Almost everyone is affected by it. Distraction means that, although I am still going through the motions of praying, my mind has left the Lord. I have stopped raising my mind to God and turned it to something of this life and this world. This is a key to overcoming distractions – saying exactly what it is. What that means, then (and it affects me too), is that either the pressures and demands of this world, or my own disordered desires, have enticed me to leave my inner room and prioritize them over God. Meditating with some frequency on things like the end of this life, eternal life, judgement, the great goodness of God, the purpose of this life – will all help to overcome distractions. Do not be discouraged by distractions, our Lord knows our weaknesses. Victory goes to the determined and those who persevere.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.