



62. Meditation

Meditation plays a very important part in our spiritual exercises, particularly from the point-of-view that our asceticism essentially consists in living everyday life wholeheartedly. In a course based on St Ignatius' spiritual exercises Fr Kentenich summarised a great deal of practical experience with regard to meditation. After all, retreats are an exercise largely made up of meditations. The text mentions important points especially about the great goals and main points (meditation as a school of love; it isn't a great deal of knowledge that nourishes the soul ...), as well as the many little, practical points that are worthwhile considering (time, room, physical dimension). The text is an extract from the tenth conference of the Retreat Course on "Der Heroische Mensch" – The Heroic Person (1936/7), A5 duplicated edition, p. 142-151. Fr Kentenich also taught St Ignatius' very polished method of meditation in a very popular and simple form, which is illustrated in the second text of this chapter. It is taken from the Milwaukee Tertianship, 21st Conference (14 January 1963), Vol II, p. 215f.

Which practices are contained in the Ignatian instructions? They can be traced back to three groups: meditation, research, penitential practices.

Meditation according to Ignatius: In this regard Ignatius determined the objective method and content.

1. The style of meditation

Allow me to repeat what Ignatius was saying, but using my own terminology. Meditation is a school of love. I think that by saying that I have said everything that is relevant to us today. We distinguish between a large and a small school of love. The large one is the actual meditation: concentrating exclusively on our self-surrender to God. The small one is meant to follow us

through the whole day in tiny glances up to God. Ignatius expressed it in this way: the thoughts we have savoured during our meditation have to be brought back to life repeatedly during the day. So how must we meditate; how are we to live the great school of love to the full? I fear that I will now be repeating what is taught in the Novitiate, but I think it won't do any harm. When we are older, we are more able to see things organically. Until now we couldn't do much with the teaching of St Ignatius, because we saw it fairly mechanically. But this is not what Ignatius meant. If the soul wants to belong completely to God, it is necessary to integrate certain times into our day's work during which we are completely concentrated, and can breathe in and out vitally, giving God all the strength of our love. Even as mature people we are too little able to cope with these times, because we tear them out of their context. We work and rampage until the time for meditation arrives, and then we want to meditate in a concentrated way. By day we are absorbed by false values. So we need to prepare, otherwise meditation is a time for sleeping, a time for playing, but not a time when we are inwardly bonded to God, in a personal way with our personal God. That is why Ignatius sets such great store by the preparation and follow-up. This gives us three points-of-view.

2. Preparing the meditation

This is perhaps the most important part. It begins in the evening, in the preparation during night prayer, and reaches a climax in the few minutes before we fall asleep. Shortly before we fall asleep we should know clearly when we will get up the next morning and for what purpose we are getting up.

The time we get up: This clarity is more a simple statement, not a purposeful shout into the soul. It is a normal and very basic part of a sound, ascetical life to go to bed at a certain time and to rise at a predetermined time. There is much chaos in our religious life because we overlook this point. Since we don't observe it, we are often deprived of our identity, we lose too much of the core of our personality. I think I have to say that, because we grab hold of many means, but hardly know this simple means that has proved its worth over the centuries.

Just as with going to sleep, so the same applies to getting up. There is often an instinct in our nature that urges us to extend the time by fifteen minutes, then one more and one more after that. Such things won't save us, but notice how important it is for us to get up immediately, and to regulate our time of getting up by a resolution. Our instincts must then submit to what is decided. Serious ascetical teachers advise us that if we have overstepped our resolution – we are basing ourselves on heroism – we should get up that much earlier the following morning. So don't just make a general resolution, or express general remorse: *Mea culpa*,¹⁹⁵ and the following morning sleep even five minutes longer! No! Behind it there must be vigorous determination. Ignatius was a man who saw the goal, and knew clearly that it had to be reached not just by knowledge and prayer, but by serious exertion of the will. Also our will has to become active.

When we read Ignatius, we could almost think he anticipated the Coué method.¹⁹⁶ If I fall asleep at night with certain thoughts, they continue to work in me, and in the morning I am disposed to carry them out. That is why nervous people are advised to only think calm thoughts in the evening, so that they can sleep that night. Ignatius also wants us to be able to sleep calmly at night. So,

¹⁹⁵ Through my fault – from the *Confiteor* (I confess).

¹⁹⁶ Emile Coué (1857-1926), a French psychotherapist who founded the first recognised school of autosuggestion. His starting point can be compared with the contemporary idea of "autogenic training". Emile Coué, *Self Mastery Through Conscious Autosuggestion*, 2010 (Amazon).

when do I get up in the morning? If I think about it quite simply, my soul will be well disposed to carry it out in the morning. Unconscious resistance will then be basically overcome.

The purpose for which we get up: According to our method this refers to our morning consecration. I work out the first act I want to perform when I wake up in the morning. Once again not so much as a resolution; no, I think myself into it somewhat. Now all the business of the day stops! That is heroism, that is the meaning of the Great Silence after night prayer. We often complain that we don't progress and manage nothing. Extraordinary means such as conferences, retreats and training courses are no use if we don't learn to make use of the usual means. They could even be a means of deceiving ourselves. We again whip up enthusiasm: Now it will be done! And then we don't do it. Even the retreat we are attending at the moment will be a flop unless we want to learn to make use of these usual means.

What should such a morning consecration include? In our way of thinking and speaking, it is exactly the same as what Ignatius wanted – our asceticism is actually ancient: The sign of the Cross, renewal of personal ideal (PI) and special resolution (PE), "My Queen, my Mother", and then a brief preparation for the thoughts of meditation. We find the same with Ignatius, but expressed differently. Read it up for yourselves.¹⁹⁷ Since meditation is a school of love, since we want to arrive at love through it, we prepare ourselves for it. So, when I wake up in the night, I should also pause for a time in the world of the meditation. Also after the morning consecration in the time of meditation. At any rate, all thoughts of my work have to be banished. I don't have to fill my mind with new knowledge, I have to practice my love again!

3. The meditation itself

St Ignatius' formulation is like a nut. First of all the hard outer shell has to be cracked, then we will find the profound content.

3.1 The attitude

We have to pause reverently at the place where we have our meditation, and come into contact with our personal God. We have to learn to tremble with profound reverence before him, but also converse with him with familiar love. Compare this with what Ignatius says in the third prelude about the attitude of soul when conversing with God. The fundamental emotion towards God is reverent love. But if I only talk about God, or if I merely think of God, I don't get there. However, if my appetites fly up towards God – and that is the meaning of a school of love, as St Ignatius stressed strongly – my reverent love has to become strong and fervent. So, as we have emphasised so often, I may not see God just as an idea, but as a living Person. It is with this living Person that I am communicating during my meditation, I converse with him with reverent love. If we want to put it very simply, we could say: Now God has set aside his business of government; he wants to spend half an hour only with me; he wants to communicate only with me. It is possible that this has been put too simply, but it is a means to help us note how it is meant. This brings us to our attitude while we are communicating with God, and places it in the right light.

3.1.1 The outward attitude

"I now begin my meditation, either kneeling, or prostrate on the ground ... or sitting or standing,"

¹⁹⁷ Fr Kantenich was using the first volume of Walter Sierp's book, *Hochschule der Gottesliebe* – High School of God's Love – The Retreat of St Ignatius of Loyola, 3 vols, Warendorf 1935-37.

or walking up and down. How much psychology the ancient ascetes practiced in their outward attitude during prayer! On the basis of the body-soul principle it is the expression of the inner attitude, but it also deepens and influences that inner attitude. We like to smile about these things. If I do it in a purely mechanical way, it is unworthy of me. But if I copy our Lord in Gethsemane? For us kneeling is the normal way. Some consider walking up and down the best, others prefer lying prostrate. Of course, if it really is the best for you, choose it for yourself. St Ignatius said, "If I find what I desire when kneeling, I should not look for another position; the same applies if I find what I desire when I am prostrate on the ground, and so on." However, in this regard we must also be somewhat wary of ourselves. Walking up and down mostly means that we are too busy; we cannot be still before God. A few thoughts chase better and more quickly through my mind, but this is not meditation!

3.1.2 The attitude of soul

If I relish an idea. I should calmly remain with it without worrying anxiously about moving on. Firstly, secondly, thirdly – that is not Ignatius' method of meditation. If it rains, I allow myself to be doused, if not, I try until I am given water. If God allows me to relish a truth, I enjoy it as long as he wills; if he doesn't give me any, I remain faithful in my efforts. Meditation – you now see this clearly – is primarily a school of love, not a school of thoughts, or a school of sleeping, or of preparing a sermon. It's not the great quantity of knowledge, but savouring and assimilating divine things that satisfies the soul. Reflection is more a means to a goal. As soon as the soul warms to a truth, it should remain with it.

3.2 *The method of meditation*

Also here you will find the same consistent process: From knowledge to love! Meditation should help my knowledge to become love. What method do I have to use? I am now saying nothing new, I am only repeating and making applications.

I have to see to it that my knowledge becomes experienced knowledge.

3.2.1 So I have to think through the thoughts I have chosen as the basis for my meditation independently and on my own. In the process I remember that my declared purpose in thinking is to learn to love more deeply. I want to make use of what I think, and the new thoughts, insights and larger contexts I experience, in order to love. A very profound calm in a clearly recognised thought. That is meditation, because love is to be found in it. This is the way for my knowledge to be experienced, and become knowledge connected with love.

3.2.2 Now if God himself gives the warmth of love, if he allows it to rain, or if our heart is already warmed after brief reflection, the ideal of meditation consists in resting not in a thought, but in an emotion. This enables us to understand the saints, for example, St Augustine, who never tired of repeating with a feeling of fervent love, "*O pulchritudo semper antiqua et semper nova* – O Beauty eternally old and eternally new!" Or, St Francis of Assisi who spent the whole night with the invocation, "My God and my All!" Or, St Francis Xavier, who hastened through the lands of Asia and was upheld all the while by the thought of the Triune God, "*O beata Trinitas, O Trinitas beata!*" With all the saints there is this emotionally toned resting in their personal ideal. This could last for months, or even longer, when God gives us the grace. And that is true meditation.

3.2.3 I have to combine experienced knowledge with a corresponding exertion of the will. That

always applies, but especially to the difficult times of inner aridity and dryness; I must then exert my will! I want to savour the truth, I want to love God completely. That is true meditation. Ignatius said it almost word for word, Fr Sierp enlarged on it beautifully. Read it for yourselves.

I must also see to it that my experienced knowledge is bedewed with grace. I take that for granted. Even our emotions of longing are nothing else than practices of prayer that bring graces to flow. So you can see again that meditation is not a school of knowledge, but a school of love!

4. Follow up

Reflect on where the faults lay, prayer, resolution, some notes. Behind it there are very profound principles. The soul must again rest while I make my notes. What I note down is an evaluation.

Of course, we may have reasons not to do this. In the end you will object that we have drifted from the subject. We wanted to speak about the solution, humility, and have in fact always spoken about bonding and love. I have given you a form of meditation that transcends time. Please recall that there can be no growth in humility without the growth of love, and vice versa, there is no growth in love without the growth in humility. This returns us to our subject.

The most down-to-earth form of meditation

If you now want to take in the most down-to-earth form of meditation, we have to ask three questions:

Firstly, what does God want to say to me through what I have just recognised clearly? I want to digest this inwardly once again. What does he want to say to me?

Secondly, this is a form of examination of conscience. How have I understood this truth in my life until now? How have I turned it to account? How have I applied it?¹⁹⁸

And then the third question, what do I now want to tell God? That is the main point. We have to learn to talk to God; we have to learn to cultivate a profound, inner “two-getherness” with God. That is the meaning of meditation. Or, if you like, meditation has to become a school of love. Hence the question: What do I want to say to God?

What can it be? It can be an act of gratitude; so I thank him for this insight. It can be an act of embarrassment; it can be an resolution; or it can be a petition.

Now don't try to meditate in such a methodical way, but simply and naturally in a way that suits yourself. If you prefer another way of meditation, you should do it. But always remember that it is not listening that is the most important thing at the moment, but the independent and inner preparation, and the loving digestion that is connected with life. I think we are sufficiently prepared for this. So I think we should also try to do it.

Allow me to refer back to the first thought: dissatisfaction and the courage to start again. We start

¹⁹⁸ On other occasions Fr Kentenich formulated the second question as follows: “What do I tell myself?”, so that the three simple steps are: What is God saying to me? What am I telling myself? What do I want to say to God?

again; how do we start again, now that a profound longing has been awakened in us to carry out our mission? How can we start again? Let us consider: What is lacking and what can we do to remove this lack, partly in our personal, inner life, and partly in our community life?