

Maximus Confessor (580-662), *The Four Hundred Chapters on Love*

If the life of the mind is the illumination of knowledge and this is born of love for God, then it is well said that there is nothing greater than love.

When, in the full ardor of its love for God the mind goes out of itself, then it has no perceptions at all either of itself or of any creatures. For once illumined by the divine and infinite light, it remains insensible to anything that is made by him, just as the physical eye has no sensation of the stars when the sun has risen.

All the virtues assist the mind in the pursuit of divine love, but above all does pure prayer. By it the mind is given wings to go ahead to God and becomes alien to all things.

When through love the mind is ravished by divine knowledge and in going outside of creatures has a perception of divine transcendence, then, according to the divine Isaiah, it comes in consternation to a realization of its own lowliness and says with conviction the words of the prophet: "Woe is me, for I am stricken at heart; because being a man I have unclean lips, I dwell in the midst of a people with unclean lips and I have seen with my eyes the King, the Lord of hosts."

The one who loves God leads an angelic life on earth, fasting and being watchful and singing psalms and praying and always thinking good of everyone.

Do not soil your mind by holding on to thoughts of concupiscence and anger, lest by falling from pure prayer you fall in with the spirit of discouragement.

There are two supreme states of pure prayer, one corresponding to those of the active life, the other to the contemplatives. The first arises in the soul from the fear of God and an upright hope, the second from divine desire and total purification. The marks of the first type are the drawing of one's mind away from all the world's considerations, and as God is present to one, as indeed he is, he makes his prayers without distraction or disturbance. The marks of the second type are that at the very outset of prayer the mind is taken hold of by divine and infinite light and is conscious neither of itself nor of any other being whatever except of him who through love brings about such brightness in it. Then, when it is concerned with the properties of God, it receives impressions of him which are clear and distinct.

The demons wage war on those who are at the summit of prayer to prevent them from receiving simple representations of material things. They war on contemplatives to cause passionate thoughts to linger in their minds, and on those who are struggling in the active life to persuade them to sin by action. In every way these accursed beings struggle against everyone in order to separate men from God.

It is said that the supreme state of prayer is when the mind passes outside the flesh and the world and while praying is completely without matter and form. The one who preserves this state without compromise really "prays without ceasing."

Just as the body which is dying is separated from all the realities of the world, so is the mind which dies on the heights of prayer separated from the thoughts of the world. For if it does not die such a death it cannot be and live where God is.

When the mind has become stripped of passions and enlightened in the contemplation of beings, then it can be in God and pray as it ought.

All passionate thoughts either excite the concupiscible, disturb the irascible, or darken the rational element of the soul. From this it comes about that the mind is hampered in its spiritual contemplation and in the flight of prayer. And because of this the monk, and especially the solitary, should give serious heed to his thoughts and both know and eliminate their causes.

The virtues separate the mind from the passions; spiritual contemplations separate it from simple representations; then pure prayer sets it before God himself.

Humility is continual prayer with tears and suffering. For this constant calling on God for help does not allow us to trust foolishly in our own strength and wisdom nor to be arrogant toward others. These are the dangerous diseases of the passion of pride.

If you bear a grudge against anyone, pray for him and you will stop the passion in its tracks. By prayer you separate the hurt from the memory of the evil which he did you and in becoming loving and kind you completely obliterate passion from the soul. On the other hand, if someone bears you a grudge, be generous and humble with him, treat him fairly, and you will deliver him from the passion.

Those who are still timid in the war against the passions and who fear the inroads of invisible enemies should be quiet, that is, not engage in warlike behavior above their strength, but by prayer abandon the care of themselves to God's concern.

The one who prays ought never to halt his movement of sublime ascent toward God. For just as we understand the ascents "from strength to strength" as the progress in the practice of the virtues, "from glory to glory" as the advance in spiritual knowledge of contemplation, and the transfer from the letter of Holy Writ to its spirit, so in the same way the one who is settled in the place of prayer should lift his mind from human matters and the attention of the soul to more divine realities. This will enable him to follow the one who has "passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God," who is everywhere and who in his incarnation passes through all things on our account. If we follow him, we also pass through all things with him and come beside him if we know him not in the limited condition of his descent in the incarnation but in the majestic splendor of his natural infinitude.

The aim of prayer should direct us to the mystery of deification so that we might know from what things the condescension through the flesh of the Only Son kept us away and whence and where he brought us by the strength of his gracious hand, those of us who had reached the lowest point of the universe where the weight of sin had confined us. Let us love more intensely the one who so wisely prepared for us such a salvation. By what we do let us show that the prayer is fulfilled, and manifest and proclaim that God is truly a Father through grace.