

From “The Way of the Heart” by Henri J. M. Nouwen¹

For us who are mind-oriented it is of special importance to learn to pray with and from the heart.... We find the best formulation of the prayer of the heart in the words of the Russian Mystic, Theophan the Recluse: “To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all-seeing within you.” ... Prayer is standing in the presence of God with the mind in the heart; that is, at that point of our being where there are no divisions or distinctions and where we are totally one. There God’s Spirit dwells and there the great encounter takes place. There heart speaks to heart, because there we stand before the face of the Lord, all-seeing within us.

We have to realize that here the word heart is used in its full biblical meaning. In our milieu the word heart has become a soft word. It refers to the seat of the sentimental life.... But the word heart in the Jewish-Christian tradition refers to the source of all physical, emotional, intellectual, volitional, and moral energies.

From the heart rises unknowable impulses as well as conscious feelings, moods, and wishes. The heart, too, has its reasons and is the center of perception and understanding. Finally, the heart is the seat of the will: it makes plans and comes to good decisions. Thus the heart is the central and unifying organ of our personal life. Our heart determines our personality, and is therefore not only the place where God dwells but also the place to which Satan addresses his fiercest attacks. It is the heart that is the place of prayer. The prayer of the heart is a prayer that directs itself to God from the center of the person and thus affects the whole of our humanness.

... (The Desert Fathers) show us that real prayer penetrates the marrow of our soul and leaves nothing untouched. The prayer of the heart is a prayer that does not allow us to limit our relationship with God to interesting words or pious emotions. By its very nature such prayer transforms our whole being into Christ precisely because it opens the eyes of our soul to the truth of ourselves as well as the truth of God. In our heart we come to see ourselves as sinners embraced by the mercy of God. It is this vision that makes us cry out, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”² The prayer of the heart challenges us to hide absolutely nothing from God and to surrender ourselves unconditionally to his mercy.

Thus the prayer of the heart is the prayer of truth. It unmask the many illusions about ourselves and about God and leads us into the true relationship of the sinner to the merciful God.”

¹ Fr. Nouwen is speaking of the Desert Fathers efforts to pray always through a form of prayer called hesychastic prayer. This is associated with the Jesus Prayer.

² This is the standard formula of the Jesus Prayer.