The Ordinary Kinds of Thoughts

The great battle in the early stages of contemplative prayer is with thoughts. It is important to recognize the various kinds of thoughts and thought patterns that come down the stream of consciousness and to learn the best way to handle each kind.

The easiest variety of thoughts to recognize is the ordinary wanderings of the imagination. The imagination is a perpetual motion faculty and is constantly grinding away. It is unrealistic to aim at having no thoughts. When we speak of developing interior silence, we are speaking of a relative degree of silence. By interior silence we refer primarily to a state in which we do not become attached to the thoughts as they go by.

Suppose you are conversing with someone on the seventh floor of a downtown office building with the windows wide open. There is a constant hum of traffic from the street. Obviously you cannot do anything to prevent the noise from continuing. If you get annoyed and say, “Why don’t they keep quiet?” or get in the elevator and go downstairs and start shouting, “Why don’t you people shut up?” you will only succeed in bringing your conversation to an end. If you just continue your conversation and put up with the hum, you will gradually develop a capacity to pay no attention to it. This is the best solution for the wanderings of the imagination. Make up your mind that they are going to be present as part of the
reality of your inner world. If you fully accept them, they will begin to fade into insignificance.

Once in a while, however, the hubbub gets louder, say at the rush hour, and the decibels increase to an unbearable degree. You have to accept that too. Sometimes you will be persecuted from start to finish by the wanderings and ravings of the imagination. That does not mean that your prayer was no good or that you did not benefit from some degree of interior silence. As you persevere, you will gradually develop new habits and new capacities, one of which is the ability to be conscious of two levels of awareness at the same time. You can be aware of the noise in or around you, and yet you recognize that your attention is grasped by something at a deeper level that is impossible to define but is nonetheless real.

The ability to build a wall around your interior silence during this prayer is a phenomenon that you may experience fairly soon in regard to external sounds. If you fully accept the noise, it scarcely bothers you. If you fight it, struggle with it, or wish it were not there, you will get all wrapped up in particular sounds. Although you may not succeed right away, eventually you will experience a delightful silence at a deep level even though noise is going on around you.

I once visited a family who lived over the Third Avenue El in New York shortly before it was taken down. Their apartment overlooked the tracks. Every now and then a train would roar by. For me the din was absolutely shattering. I thought the train was going right through the living room. But the family seemed to be blissfully unaware of it. They would be chatting away and when a train would come, everybody just stopped talking because it was impossible to be heard. After the train went by, they took up the conversation exactly where they left off as though nothing had happened. They had built the deafening sound into their lives. But for someone who was not used to it, it was not only an interruption but the end of the conversation.

So it is with the rumbling that goes on in our heads. It is so bad sometimes that many people will not put up with it. They say, “Interior silence and contemplative prayer are for the birds. I cannot endure this barrage of tiresome thoughts going through my head.” So they get up and leave. If they would just hang on and give themselves a little more time, they would get used to the noise.

The habitual practice of centering prayer gradually reduces the amount of interior noise. In the beginning you are bound to be bombarded by thoughts without end. Most of us, before we begin the method of centering prayer or some other process of quieting the mind, are not even aware of how many thoughts we actually have. But when we start to quiet down, we begin to realize the amazing amount of nonsense stored in our heads. Some people may even get a little scared by how much is going on in there. They find they would rather put up with the ordinary flow of their superficial thoughts.

We should set up conditions that are most conducive for our prayer: find a quiet time of the day away from phones and other foreseeable interruptions. Take the advice of Jesus when he speaks of praying in secret to the Father. If you have a bunch of youngsters running around the house, it may be hard to find a quiet spot or time. For some people the only quiet place may be in the bathtub. In any case, you should find a spot and a time where and when you are least likely to be interrupted. Some noises, like lawn mowers or airplane engines, can be integrated into interior silence, but noises that engage the intellect and imagination, such as loud conversation, are hard to handle.

To sum up, the best response to the ordinary wanderings of the imagination is to ignore them; not, however, with a feeling of annoyance or anxiety, but with one of acceptance and peace. Every response to God, whatever it is, must begin with the full acceptance of reality as it actually is at the moment. Since it is part of our nature to have a wandering imagination, however much you might want to be quiet, accept the fact that thoughts are certain to come. The solution is not to try to make the mind a blank. That is not what interior silence is.

During the entire course of a period of centering prayer, we are slipping in and out of interior silence. One’s interior attention is like a balloon on a calm day slowly settling to the ground. Just as it is about to touch the ground, a zephyr comes from nowhere and the balloon starts to go up again. Similarly, in centering prayer there is a tantalizing moment when one feels about to slip into the most delightful silence. That is just the moment that some unwanted thought comes along. It takes great patience to accept the thought and not to be sad because one is prevented from entering that silence. Just start over. This constant starting over with patience, calm, and acceptance trains us for the acceptance of the whole of life. It prepares us for action. There should be a basic acceptance of whatever is
actually happening before we decide what to do with it. Our first reflex is to want to change reality or at least to control it.

A second kind of thought that comes down the stream of consciousness during this prayer occurs when, in the course of the wanderings of the imagination, you get interested in some particular thought and notice your attention moving in that direction. You may also feel yourself getting emotionally involved in it.

Any emotionally charged thought or image, whether it comes from outside or from our imagination, initiates an automatic response in the appetitive system. Depending on whether the image is pleasant or unpleasant, you feel a spontaneous like or dislike for it. When you notice that there is curiosity in a particular thought or a clinging sensation, the proper response is to return to the sacred word. This reaffirms your original intention of opening to God and of surrendering to Him.

Our consciousness, as we have said, is like a great river on the surface of which our superficial thoughts and experiences are moving by like boats, debris, water skiers or other things. The river itself is the participation God has given us in His own being. It is that part of us on which all the other faculties rest, but we are ordinarily unaware of it because we are absorbed with what is passing by on the surface of the river.

In centering prayer we begin to shift our attention from the boats and objects on the surface to the river itself, to that which sustains all our faculties and is their source. The river in this analogy has no qualities or characteristics. It is spiritual and limitless because it is a participation in God’s being. Suppose you get interested in some boat and find yourself looking in the hold to see what is on board. You are slipping away from your original intention. You must keep turning your attention from what is on the surface of the river to the river itself, from the particular to the general, from forms to the formless, from images to the imageless. Returning to the sacred word is a way of renewing your intention to seek God’s inward presence in faith.

Let’s return to the image of conversing with a friend on the seventh floor in a downtown office building. At the rush hour horns begin to honk. You start to wonder what is going on, so your attention is drawn away from the conversation with your friend. Courtesy requires that you renew your attention. So you turn your gaze toward your friend as if to say, “Excuse me,” or, “As I was saying.” In other words, a simple movement to reaffirm your conversation is called for. It is not a question of fighting, stopping or shutting out the noise, but of returning to your original intention. In similar fashion, when, in centering prayer, you notice that you are thinking some other thought, simply give your attention back to God, and as a sign of your intention, think the sacred word.

There is no question of repeating the sacred word as if it were a magic formula to empty the mind or to force the word upon your consciousness. By returning to the sacred word, you reaffirm your choice to converse with God and to be united to Him. This does not demand effort but surrender. Thus whenever you return to the sacred word, do so without exasperation or desperation. Over-reacting is counter-productive. No one cuts a lawn with a bulldozer. All you need to brush away a fly is a movement of your hand. In centering prayer the patient renewal of your intention is sufficient activity.

There are all kinds of ways in which God speaks to us—through our thoughts or any one of our faculties. But keep in mind that God’s first language is silence. Prepare yourself for silence in this prayer, and if other things happen, that is His problem, not yours. As soon as you make it your problem, you tend to desire something that is other than God. Pure faith will bring you closer to God than anything else. To be attached to an experience of God is not God; it is a thought. The time of centering prayer is the time to let go of all thoughts, even the best of thoughts. If they are really good, they will come back later.

What do you think of drugs as a means of inducing mystical experience?

Some seem to find spiritual experience through certain psychedelic drugs. It’s much more desirable, however, to have a built-in discipline than to depend on drugs, which don’t always work as desired. Like certain powerful methods of Eastern meditation, drugs may release material from the unconscious before one is able to deal with it. Some people taking LSD had bad trips because they did not have the psychological preparation to handle what emerged from their unconscious as a result of the drug.

This afternoon I felt very heavy and tired.
You will often notice an alternation between so-called good and bad periods of prayer. Try to give up those categories altogether.

One thought I had was, “What is the sense of all this? Get up and walk out.” Of course, I did not go.

Good. It was just another thought. No matter how much a thought may persecute you, all you have to do is let it go by. By fighting it, you stir up other thoughts.

I would like to clarify something I was wrestling with. In the past, I have worked determinedly to be centered. I have had a sense of pushing to concentrate versus quietly and gently centering in.

You cannot do this prayer by will power. The more effort you put into it, the less well it goes. When you catch yourself trying hard, relax and let go. Introduce the sacred word gently, incredibly gently, as if you were laying a feather on a piece of absorbent cotton.

Of course, when thoughts are flying at you like baseballs, you look around for some means to protect yourself. But swatting them out of the park is not the way to do it. You should honestly say, “Well, I am being pummeled with these thoughts,” and put up with them, remembering that if you just wait, they will all pass by. Do not oppose violence with violence. This prayer is totally nonviolent. A sign of trying too hard is a feeling of tightness in the forehead or in the back of the neck. If you allow your attention to flow with that pain for a few moments, it usually goes away. In other words, accept the fact that you have the pain. Rest in the presence of the pain. Pain has a way of dissolving every other thought. It brings the mind to a single point, which is also the purpose of the sacred word. When the pain subsides, you may need your sacred word again.

Throughout the first period of prayer there was a counseling session going on down the hall that was loud enough for me to catch bits and snatches. I felt like shouting the sacred word to overcome the noise.

In that situation there is not much you can do but keep returning to the sacred word, yet always with the acceptance of the situation just as it is. Sometimes you cannot do anything but put up with the noise. Think that you are being refreshed at a deeper level, but you just can’t enjoy it.

If at some distant future time, prayer should go beyond thirty minutes, or maybe even an hour, at some point your back may complain. Is that the time to say, “This is where the prayer should cease”? Or should you just keep going?

Your prayer should normally finish before you develop a sore back. One generally has a sense when one’s normal period of prayer is over. For some people this might come after twenty minutes. For others, after half an hour or longer. I doubt that you would go for more than an hour without sensing that your prayer was over. But you are free to develop it to that point if you have the attraction and the grace to sustain it.

A better way of prolonging prayer would be set up two periods of ordinary length back to back with a slow, meditative walk around the room for five to ten minutes in between. This would help to dispel the restlessness that may develop from sitting in one position for a long time.

Length of time, however, is not an indicator of the value of one’s prayer. The quality of prayer rather than its quantity is what matters. A single moment of divine union is more valuable than a long period of prayer during which you are constantly in and out of interior silence. It only takes a moment for God to enrich you. In that sense the waiting process is a preparation for moments of divine union. Union may occur for only an instant, yet you can be more enriched than someone spending an hour or two on lower forms of contemplative prayer without such a moment of absorption in God. Each of us has to figure out from practice and experimentation when our period of prayer is normally over. To prolong it simply because it is going well is not a good idea.

As I find myself going deeper, I get frightened and pull myself out of it. I am afraid I am going to stay down there. I do not know if the fear is psychological, physical, or spiritual.

This is a common experience. When you get close to the edge of self-forgetfulness, unless the divine attraction is strong and reassuring, you may
experience fear. Our imagination represents the unknown as frightening. If you ignore it and take the plunge anyway, you will find that the water is delightful.

Last night I let myself go, but then I pulled myself out of it. I was so sorry afterward, and I did not know why I did it.

Before you begin your prayer, say to God, “If You want to pull me over to the other side, go ahead.” Then relax. When you submitted to an anesthetic for the first time, you did not know what would happen. If it had not been more or less forced on you, you probably would not have taken it. This prayer is the same sort of situation. You do not know what it is going to be like when you stop reflecting. But try it.

I was on the verge of a beautiful experience, but that fear was there, so I stopped. I do not know why I pulled myself out of it.

Try not to reflect on the experience at all while it is happening; just let go.

Is there a way of doing this prayer too frequently so that you lapse into passivity?

Only if you do it for more than five or six hours a day over a long period of time. I do not think three or four hours a day would have any adverse effects at all. Many could pray longer if they built up to it gradually over a period of several months. If you are doing it correctly, you may notice in your activity an increase of energy rather than passivity. That is because you are being freed from a lot of emotional hang-ups that used to exhaust you.

That your superficial faculties are aware of a lot of boats and debris coming down the stream of consciousness does not mean that your other faculties, intellect, and will, are not deeply recollected in God. You may be painfully aware of unwanted thoughts going by and wish they were not there. At the same time you may be aware that something inside of you is absorbed by a mysterious presence that is completely intangible, refined, and delicate. The reason is that your psyche is developing the expanded awareness that I spoke of before, which is able to attend to two planes of reality at the same time, one superficial and the other profound. If you are wrapped up in superficial thoughts or are upset because you have such thoughts, you will not experience the deeper level. There are other times, however, when you will not experience the deeper level, no matter how open you are to it, because of the noise of the imagination or memory.

If the time goes quickly during prayer, that is a sign you were deeply absorbed, perhaps much more than you realized. When there are no objects going by in your imagination, the sense of time is disrupted. If there are no objects going by, there is an experience of timelessness. You are fully aware, yet not of time. Time is a projection of self. When there is no thought, you are free of time. This gives you an intuition into the fact that when the body slips away from the spirit, no great change is going to take place. In deep prayer you do not think about the body anyway. The prospect of dying is not so threatening because you have experienced a preview of what it might be like for the spirit to be separated from the body, and it is delightful.

During prayer I sometimes have a happy-go-lucky feeling that I find most enjoyable.

You should not take prayer too seriously. There is something playful about God. You only have to look at a penguin or certain other animals to realize that He likes to play little jokes on creatures. The playfulness of God is a profound part of reality. It warns us to not take ourselves too seriously, to realize that God created us with a certain sense of humor.

Does my guardian angel know what goes on in my centering prayer?

Not unless you tell him! Angels and devils cannot perceive what you are doing in contemplative prayer if it is deep enough. They can only know what is in your imagination and memory, and they can add material to these faculties. But when you are in deep interior silence, what is happening there is God’s secret. Only He knows what goes on in the depths of the soul. Some people think that if you quiet the mind, you open yourself up to diabolical forces. But according to John of the Cross, you are never safer than when you are absorbed in God’s presence, beyond thoughts and feelings, for there the demons cannot touch you. It is only when you come out of interior silence that they can badger you with temptations. That
is why one of the best ways of handling temptations is to slip into the same attitude you take during contemplative prayer. This is what David means when he sings of God in the Psalms as “my refuge, my strength, my rock, my strong fortress, my high tower, my rampart”[1] We do not have to be afraid of opening ourselves to unknown dangers by practicing contemplative prayer. No one can join us at that level except He who is deeper than that level, the God who dwells within us and out of whose creative love we emerge at every moment.

During my period of prayer today, there was a thought that kept coming back. After my prayer was over, it came back again. It was a selfish thought. I brought it to the chapel and prayed before the Lord. I made a gift of it to Him and then I felt very good. I felt as though it was a splinter getting in my way and I had just taken it out. Is there an advantage in taking such things to the Lord in prayer when you can talk to Him like that?

By all means follow your attraction. We should go to God with great freedom. I emphasize contemplative prayer because it is an area that has been neglected in recent centuries. The time that you devote to interior silence is not meant to be in conflict with other forms of prayer.

In the beginning of centering, I used to find it very difficult not to break out into vocal prayer if I felt I was not getting somewhere, but now I understand that as you try to empty yourself, you make room for the Spirit to come in and pray in the innermost recesses of your being. This has helped me to put out thoughts. I see there is no need for me to try to pray in words, but that I should relax and let Him come in to pray.

Prayer is not designed to change God but to change us. The faster we let that happen, the better our prayer is going to be. But once we have gotten interested in God and have begun to seek Him, the best thing to do is to be silent in prayer and to let Him complete the process. Isn’t that the great significance of the Blessed Virgin Mary? She could not possibly forget God. She was prayer in her very being and in every one of her actions.

What is the great thing that Our Lady has done for us? She brought

1. Cf. Psalms 17, 27, 30, 45, 58, 61, 70, 90.

the Word of God into the world, or rather let Him come into the world through her. It is not so much what we do but what we are that allows Christ to live in the world. When the presence of God emerges from our inmost being into our faculties, whether we walk down the street or drink a cup of soup, divine life is pouring into the world. The effectiveness of every action depends on the source from which it springs. If it is coming out of the false self, it is severely limited. If it is coming out of a person who is immersed in God, it is extremely effective. The contemplative state, like the vocation of Our Lady, brings Christ into the world.

I would like to clarify something about using contemplative prayer in times of temptation, stress, or difficulty. I have difficulty with the idea of using prayer to bring me peace. Isn’t that a selfish motive?

The principle I had in mind in suggesting slipping into contemplative prayer was to calm your thoughts and feelings, when they are getting hooked on some temptation, by practicing the same kind of letting go that you do during contemplative prayer. Temptation can be treated like any thought that comes down the stream of consciousness. If you let it go by, that is sufficient resistance. If you are unable to do that, you have to exercise other forms of resistance.

Is the attitude that we develop in our ordinary life-style of letting go of certain things a way of preparing ourselves for prayer in a tangible, practical way, so that it will be easier to let go of the thoughts when we are at prayer?

There is a reciprocal interaction between your activity during the day and your prayer, and vice versa. They mutually support one another.

How can you pray in deep silence and peace when you are very upset about something?

In such circumstances you cannot hope to pray in silence without some kind of buffer zone. You may have to run around the block, do physical exercises, or some suitable reading. Otherwise, as soon as you sit down and try to be quiet, you will think that you are sitting under Niagara Falls instead of beside the stream of consciousness. You have to give yourself a
chance to quiet down before you start to pray. Moreover, some trials are so big that they knock you flat on your face and no matter what means you take to quiet down, you will not be able to settle into interior silence. Giving yourself the usual time to pray, however, will help you to accept the problem and the emotional storm.

Why do you limit the periods of prayer to half an hour in the group?

It seems to be the normal period for prolonged attention. Longer than that might discourage people from starting or continuing. Yet it needs to be long enough to establish the sense of interior silence.

There is a great value in praying at the same time every day and for the same length of time. This will give you a stable reservoir of silence. Dividing the day between two equal periods of deep prayer gives the maximum opportunity for your reservoir of silence to affect the whole day.

The more activity in which you find yourself, the more you will need your times of prayer. Excessive activity has a way of becoming a drain. It also has a mysterious fascination. Like a treadmill or merry-go-round, it is hard to get off. Regular prayer is a real discipline. To interrupt what you are doing in order to pray can be difficult. You need to be convinced that your time of prayer is more important than any other activity apart from some urgent call of charity. You will be surprised that things you have to do fall into place and get accomplished more quickly. You will be able to see the proportionate value of your activities and what should be done first.

Why twice a day and not one longer period?

Twice a day keeps you closer to the reservoir of silence. If you get too far away from the reservoir, it is like being on the end of the water line after everybody has taken what they want from the reservoir. When you turn on the faucet, you only get a few drops. To prevent that from happening, keep the pressure up. You need to keep filling your reservoir until you eventually strike an artesian well. Then the water is always flowing.

Contemplative prayer is a preparation for action, for action that emerges from the inspiration of the Spirit in the silencing of our own agitation, desires and hang-ups. Such silence gives God the maximum opportunity to speak.

During prayer is it all right to reflect on what is happening or is it better to let it go?

During this prayer it is not appropriate to reflect on what is happening. We should completely suspend judgment during this prayer. Afterwards it may be helpful to reflect on it. As you gain experience, you have to keep integrating your prayer into the rest of your life of faith. That requires some form of conceptualization. At the same time, you do not have to analyze your prayer to gain its benefits. It is just as well not to watch what is happening. If you are getting good fruit from it, you will spontaneously notice it. In fact, other people will say, “You do not seem to be as agitated as you used to be.” There may be a certain gentleness in you that was not noticed before. You yourself may perceive that, while you used to feel like slugging somebody when you became angry, now you can be satisfied with administering a mild rebuke.

Contemplative prayer fosters a whole different attitude toward one’s feelings; it puts them in a different frame of reference. Most extreme feelings come from a sense of insecurity, especially when we feel threatened. But when you are being constantly reaffirmed by the presence of God in deep silence, you are not afraid of being contradicted or imposed upon. You might be humble enough to learn something from insults and humiliations without being overwhelmed by feelings of self-depreciation or revenge. Negative feelings toward oneself tend to be prevalent in our culture due to the low self-image people develop in early childhood, possibly because of our highly competitive society. Anyone who does not win feels that he is no good in this culture, whereas in the quiet of deep prayer, you are a new person, or rather, you are you.

What happens if, because it is consoling, you prolong centering prayer for hours?

If you overdo anything, it is bound to have some bad side effects. Too much joy as well as too much sorrow is fatiguing. The purpose of this prayer is not more prayer or more silence, but the integration of prayer and silence with activity. Consolation of a spiritual kind is so satisfying that it can be a trap. That is why by limiting contemplative prayer to a certain period
of time, you have a common sense measure for what is reasonably good for you without running the risk of spiritual gluttony. It is a precious gift to come close to interior silence. Its beauty is so incomparable that it changes one’s perception of what beauty is. If you are experiencing this fairly frequently, you gain strength to meet opposition and contradiction. Interior silence is one of the most strengthening and affirming of human experiences. There is nothing more affirming, in fact, than the experience of God’s presence. That revelation says as nothing else can, “You are a good person, I created you and I love you.” Divine love brings us into being in the fullest sense of the word. It heals the negative feelings we have about ourselves.

I am afraid that I will stop breathing during the prayer time. I feel most secure when I am getting into my body rhythm. I pay attention to that and am afraid to let it go for too long.

Your breathing may get shallow, but when you need oxygen you will breathe automatically. The body has its own good sense, and if your breathing is getting too shallow, your body will just take a deep breath. It happens in sleep; it will happen in prayer. There is a correlation between thinking and breathing. As the breath gets shallow, thoughts diminish. But as soon as you start thinking, breathing increases too.

I have heard that if you fast, meditation is enhanced. I guess that it’s a matter of training yourself.

The ability to fast is peculiar to each person. What is recommended is that one not do centering on a full stomach. The tendency of this prayer is to reduce the metabolism. A consequence of this is that the bodily processes like digestion slow down. Wait an hour and a half after a full meal. Do not practice just before going to bed. You may experience a surge of energy that might keep you awake for a few hours.

For some, fasting will enhance the experience of centering prayer. It might have the opposite effect on others. If your hunger is so intense that it preoccupies you during the time of prayer, fasting is counterproductive. The principle to follow during centering prayer is to try to forget the body. Simplicity of life, not extremes, fits in better with this kind of practice.

It helps to have the group for moral support. Is it better to center together or alone?

There is moral and psychological support in a group. That’s why it is a help to have a support group that meets regularly once a week. On the other hand, some prefer to do it alone because they don’t have to adjust to what other people are doing. Both experiences are valuable.

When I find that I am not thinking about anything, I find myself thinking about my breathing.

The best way to handle that is to accept it and to pay no attention. It is as if you were walking down the street to church and someone started to walk beside you. Just keep going, pay no attention to this uninvited companion, and you will wind up where you want to go. Say “yes” to everything that happens. In that way there is a better chance that the obsessive image will go by. A reaction of annoyance or of pleasure intensifies a particular thought.

All thoughts that come down the stream of consciousness are subject to time because they are moving objects, and every object has to go by. If you just wait and do not do anything about them, they will all pass by. But if you try to do something with them or to get away from them, you are stuck with them and you will start going downstream along with them. Then you will have to start over again.

Let thoughts come, let them go. No annoyance, no expectation. This is a very delicate kind of self-denial, but it is more valuable than bodily austerities, which tend to fix one’s attention on oneself. Waiting for God without going away, giving the usual time to prayer, and putting up with what goes on in the imagination are the most effective practices for acquiring true devotion. The observance of them will lead to a complete change of heart.

It seems that there are times when you are aware of something around you. The sacred word becomes a reality and you can’t make yourself repeat it. This state is not like ordinary waking consciousness, but it doesn’t feel like sleep either because there is some plane of awareness.
That is the awareness we're trying to awaken. It might be called spiritual attentiveness. This deep attention is aware of external factors, but they don't make any impression on it because we are captivated by a mysterious inward attention. It's like conversing with someone you love. You may not be saying anything special, but you are wrapped up in that person. If you are eating together in a restaurant, the waitresses may be coming and going, but if you are engaged in an interesting conversation, you don't even notice what they are doing. A waitress can even put down the check and you won't notice that it is the end of the meal or that everyone has left the place and it is time to go. This prayer is not a conversation in words, but an exchange of hearts. It is a higher level of communication than other levels of prayer and tends to integrate these lower levels into itself.

I found myself dealing with certain kinds of resistance to God. I was half aware of those resistances that I found happening spontaneously. Is it proper to use this period of prayer as a time to wrestle with oneself or God?

When one is inwardly quiet, some of the conflicts that are hidden by the ordinary flow of thoughts begin to come into focus. Normally I would not wrestle with them at this time but would let them go by. The time to reflect on them is after you come out of prayer. The value of contemplative prayer is that it's a total immersion in that aspect of our relationship to God that happens to be the most important—the cultivation of interior silence. Psychological problems may come into focus as a result of periods of great peace, and a breakthrough may emerge. But generally such insights are a trick to get you to think of something. "Anything but silence" is the response of the false self to this kind of prayer. Interior silence goes totally contrary to all the inclinations of the false self. That is why you have to lure it into being still for a little while. However, there may be some special insight into a conflict that you feel inspired to work through right away. Feel free to make an exception. But if it happens too often, you might be making a mistake.

Today I had an experience of having thoughts come and go without being concerned about them, as I usually am. I am still groping for a balance between using the sacred word and just resting in the presence. There were a few brief moments of simple presence without