Dear friends,

I said in my last letter that I would offer a few more thoughts about the formal daily prayer of the Church, but a number of pastoral conversations and questions over the last week have inclined me to write a little more generally about prayer. We will return to the subject of the Offices of prayer in due course.

A number of you have remarked that the idea of prayer as a “disposition” – as I described it – is something entirely new, so I would like to expand a bit on that observation. But first, let me ask you: who, if anybody, taught you to pray? I grew up in a non church-going household, and prayer was not a significant part of family life. My father referred to God (not irreverently) as “the man upstairs” – which, as we lived in a block of flats, made me wonder why he had such a terrible cough, and played the radio so inconsiderately loudly - and my mother - whose childhood formation in faith was in the Roman Catholic tradition - would say, “Goodnight, God bless,” and occasionally crossed herself, but that was about it. However, I did pray as a child, and continued to do so, on and off, until I came to a living faith. Prayer is deeply instinctive for us as human beings - it is part of humanity’s essence - an awareness of the numinous. At some point we become aware of prayer, and make a choice as to whether or not we allow that part of us to grow; it is a seed that needs be nurtured if it is to grow and bear fruit. A number of things can happen to prevent that growth. We may be in an environment in which prayer has no place, or only a tangential one - or we may be in a setting where prayer is imposed, as it were, from outside - many are the stories I have heard of adults remembering dull hours in school chapels, or having had “religion stuffed down my throat” (less so, these days) - and thus the spark of prayer does not kindle a living flame. There are many other reasons for the spring of prayer dwindling: hardheaded rationalism, the repressive cares or tantalising pleasures of the world, the association of prayer with childhood, and therefore a dismissal of it as something childish, to be left behind along with belief in fairies, and so on. The problem is that, the more we live in the world of seemingly concrete things - money, careers, education, love affairs, sport, hobbies, etc - and turn over our hearts and minds to them, or perhaps we feel we are using all our energies in simply staying afloat in life, so we may be inclined to see prayer as something remote, extraneous, or fanciful. For some, of course, very movingly, in my experience, the pattern of prayer established in childhood - praying before meals, kneeling to pray at bedtime, etc - continues to be nourishing, and mediates to the one praying a real sense of encounter with God - but for others it is rejected as no
more than wishful thinking. The problem is that if one has been taught that prayer is simply a matter of putting one's hands together and saying a few words, then that small activity can appear unequal to the apparently rock solid reality of life, with all its complexity and myriad challenges- prayer, from that perspective, seems about as much use as standing in front of a locked door and mumbling “abracadabra”! If we imagine prayer as essentially a chain of linguistic cause and effect, then we are labouring under a serious spiritual misapprehension. To return to my original point: prayer is better understood as a disposition or orientation towards God. Prayer begins in, and flows out from, the heart of God, and we recognise and respond to this divine activity, offering our words, or, perhaps our silence. It is the Holy Spirit who prays in us and with us and for us- this why we are taught to pray at all times in the Spirit. We might say that prayer is another word for the energy of God at work in creation, and by “energy” I do not mean something impersonal, akin to electricity (the scriptures do give us a number of metaphors or images to convey what is happening, breath, wind, flame, and so on) but the very personal action of the Holy Trinity. If we are to grasp something of what prayer is, then we must see it in continuity with the whole teaching and experience of the Christian faith- we believe that God, the one who brought all things into being, and holds all things in being - in whose image and likeness we are made- loves us unconditionally; however, there is a primal dislocation in each of us that impedes the restoration and fulfilment of the broken relationship which God in his mercy desires to heal- this relationship is what we call “communion.” Prayer is the essence of that communion, or relationship, and it is a means by which the wound of separation may begin to heal; the beautiful truth is that God himself initiates this movement towards healing- the reorientation of the soul- because the Spirit “aids us in our weakness,” and “intercedes for us”. To explicate again what I have previously written and spoken off, our prayers arise from the action of God in us; our words are an articulation – no matter how halting or rudimentary they seem to us- of that divine activity in us. The Lord is always calling us back to Himself- that is why the Word became flesh; that is why the Holy Spirit- Comforter, Counsellor, Advocate- was sent at Pentecost, to enable us to know that God is vitally with us. Next week, the Lord being my helper, I will return to the subject of praying the Office. In the meantime, let us prepare for the great celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit – I invite you to pray the collect for the day as we give thanks for the mysterious gift of prayer.