

MEDITATIONS FOR LAYFOLK

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Meditations for Layfolk by Bede Jarrett

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BY

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PREFACE

It is felt that a book of meditation for the use of layfolk is a necessity of our times. The older volumes that remain to us of the faith and piety of our fathers seem to have become forgotten, and it is suggested that the reason for this lies rather in the manner than in the matter of their composition. For it is obvious that, the more practical books of this kind are, just the more quickly do they become out of date. The very appeal that they make is due to the freshness of their ideas and the common understanding they display of contemporary life. Hence it is that the *Meditations* of Challoner and of Wiseman had such an astonishing success, precisely because they adapted to the changing times unchanging principles. Now, because what is the novelty of one age is the platitude of the next, they have lost their effect. In our own time and in our own language the two volumes of *Meditations on Christian Dogma* by Bishop Bellord, published originally through the C.T.S., are models of what this generation requires; yet it is stated by many laymen that they have found these to be rather too full of doctrinal exposition for one who wishes to be a learner in the spiritual school. To meet, therefore, the need of something even more simple than these excellent works of the Bishop, the following *Meditations* have been composed.

They are, however, submitted to the reader with extreme diffidence. To walk in the footsteps of such predecessors is to court a comparison which cannot but be disadvantageous; yet the urgency of the matter may be pleaded as its extreme justification. The thing has to be done; hence the attempt is made, even though it should end in failure.

It can hardly be questioned that the present tendency of the Catholic layfolk is to imagine that sainthood and perfection are the peculiar inheritance of religious, whether monks or nuns, which

it would be almost blasphemy for them to aspire to share. The result is that, for a great many of the laity, Catholic life consists simply in the Sunday Mass, the occasional sacraments, the daily prayers: and this narrow practice they would defend as though it were all that they were in virtue of their state called upon to show. Now it is surely to be regretted that the whole treasury of the Church, which is most needed just by those whose busy lives are crammed with material interests, should be left to the hands of so small a proportion of her children. Is it any wonder that prayers become listless and uninteresting, that Mass itself develops into routine, that the sacraments become badges of respectability or, at the most, professions of faith? The real inner life, which Christ came to endow with fuller life, shrivels up. The very idea of loving God seems to many of our generation an ideal too lofty for serious attempt.

Now surely one great remedy for this is the use of meditation. To confront ourselves every morning with some deep truth of revelation is to realize our dignity as Christians. The high doctrine that St. Paul taught to his converts, men indeed just rescued from a rather degraded paganism, insisted always on the lofty position to which each had been called. He dealt with the sinner by making him realize that he was intended to be a saint. All of us need this inspiring view of our vocation. Our lives are cast in "mean streets," and we therefore count them without honour or value. Conscious simply of their pettiness, we make no attempt to see their true grandeur. We see but dimly if we see only the vision of the glory of the world. Taking, then, day by day a glimpse at one or other of the mysteries of God, we shall surely be led to understand ever more and more the worth of those souls of ours for which Christ did not disdain to die.

There will of course be no need to worry ourselves if through some cause or other we are not able each day to fit in our meditation. So long as we can make it a general rule, we can well afford to allow some exceptions.

But perhaps the word "meditation" itself sounds too alarming? We think not, for by this time the old fear of it as an intellectual gymnastic exercise of exceptional skill should have vanished. The little treatise (C.T.S., 1d.) by Fr. Bertrand Wilberforce, O.P.,

on *Mental Prayer* is perhaps the simplest explanation of what is meant by meditation. But we can say quite shortly that meditation consists in contemplating some fact of faith or some attitude of my soul, and then addressing on that account fervent prayer to God. I put myself in the presence of God, implore His aid, then read a little, one point or even one sentence (should that suffice for me), and consider how far it affects me, how far it is a message that should have a distinct meaning for my soul. Thinking it over, I find reason for addressing myself to Him, asking for guidance, asking for strength, then quietly speaking to Him out of the fulness of my heart: for it must not be forgotten that meditation is mental prayer, a prayer of mind and heart; hence its extreme importance for all those whose lives are crowded with incident, interests, or business. For the layman, meditation is really of far more importance than it is for the religious or priest. After all, the general arrangement of day, the choral or private office, the religious cloister, are all in themselves very great helps to an attitude of mind that looks at all things from the heavenly standpoint: whereas the layman, with his own responsibilities, as binding on him as the vows are binding on the religious, has almost everything against him. His need is the greater, and his calling in that sense more heroic.

Meditation, therefore, has now become a great necessity for the layfolk; and, as has been noted, it is for this reason that this book has been written. The actual form that the meditation should take must, of course, be left to the particular fashion of each individual. There is no general method which has not to be considerably adapted to the particular temperament of the user, but on page 1 one is suggested which has been found of very great service by a layman of much experience. It will, however, be to the interests of each to form for himself such a scheme as he may find congenial.

In the actual Meditations are enshrined ideas that have come from many quarters. Some have been worked from a single phrase let fall by a great thinker, some bear a much nearer relation to the writings of others. In this latter case due acknowledgement has been made; but in many places there must be sources that have completely escaped the memory of the writer. As far as possible he has set down references, yet had that been done com-

pletely, he is aware that the footnotes would assume an undue prominence. Who, however, can give in any detail the full pedigree of his opinions?

Besides the acknowledgement thus made to those whose words have suggested so many of the thoughts here set out, I must thank Mr Britten for his help in revising the proofs.

In arranging the *Meditations* it must be frankly acknowledged that no systematic order has been followed, and it is only in a few that any sequence of thought can be traced. Within the *Meditations* themselves, much has been left undeveloped; but it is hoped that enough has been said to encourage the individual to work out his own ideas. Above all, it must be remembered that the personal application must be made by each reader for himself.

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