

30. *Time stolen from God*

How could anyone dare say to you: “The hours you spend in prayer are hours stolen from God, because God is waiting for you in the neighbor you neglect for the sake of mental prayer”? How can anyone be so completely mistaken about the purpose of human life? And show such scorn for people?

For people are scorned when they are seen to have only the right to serve God as slaves—slaves forbidden to raise their eyes toward a haughty master who would never dream of admitting them into his close friendship.

You run your business with constant concern for social justice. The best part of your leisure time is devoted to the organization you founded to aid developing countries. Despite these responsibilities, you are a husband and father who is very “present” to his family. And you say it troubles your conscience that you reserve a half hour a day and one Saturday morning a month for prayer and meditation on the Word of God!

I beg of you, don’t let unjust criticisms influence you. The “heresy of action,” of which Pius XII spoke on various occasions, has not disappeared.

I could understand your scruples if nurturing your faith, meditation and prayer were a luxury, or at least a pastime like stamp-collecting, bridge, or perhaps reading Montaigne, Saint-Simon, or Voltaire. But for a Christian, seeking to know God better comes first. You may object that love takes priority over knowledge. That’s true, but knowledge and love go hand in hand. Progress in love is scarcely possible without a persevering “search for the face of God,” to use the expression dear to the Psalmist. On the supernatural level, no less than on the purely human level, to know better leads to loving better, and loving better awakens the desire to know better.

Besides, God himself invited men to know him: “*Desist! and confess that I am God*” (Ps 46:11).

St. Thomas Aquinas explains: “It is of the nature of friendship to converse with one’s friend. Now, the conversation of man with God is carried on through contemplation.”

Interpret contemplation to be the effort (which you are making) to know God through spiritual reading and mental prayer. More precisely, it is the simple, penetrating, and delightful knowledge in which this effort normally culminates.

St. Augustine has left us a passage on this subject that will completely reassure you, I hope.

“Love of truth aspires to the holy leisure of mental prayer, but the demands of charity impel to honorable labors. When these labors are not required of us, there is nothing to hinder our search for truth and contemplation. If these labors are required, charity demands that we accomplish them. But even in such a case, it is important not to set the joy of contemplation completely aside, lest, deprived of this sweetness, we succumb at our task.”