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Biblical Roots of Meditation and Examples of Their Influence in the History of the Catholic Church in China

Abstract

This paper consists of two parts. In the first part, it aims at showing how the Bible presents meditation and similar prayer practices. The analysis will start with collecting and explaining Hebrew and Greek terms related to meditation (e.g. שיח, הגה, **διανοόμαι, μελετάω**) and their use in the Bible. Some biblical examples of the meditative prayer will also be shown. These analyses and examples will provide a number of features which constituted meditation or were characteristic to it in the Old Testament times and early Christianity. Such features include (but are not limited to) the following characteristics:

- 1) Meditation was always directed to God; it was a prayerful relationship with God. In the Old Testament, this focus on God was often expressed by pondering on what God revealed (labelled in different ways as God's law, precepts, statutes, wonders, word, etc., cf. e.g. Ps 119).
- 2) Meditation often started with, and even consisted of, reciting of the biblical text (or some other pious texts) from memory or reading it in an undertone.
- 3) Meditation was connected with the constant repeating of the same biblical (or pious) phrase and committing it to memory. In times when possessing a written scroll was a luxury, people depended on their memory much more than nowadays, and frequent repeating was necessary to learn the words of the Bible by heart or not to forget them. The biblical examples of the prayer of repeating can be found in some psalms, e.g. Ps 136 where the refrain כִּי לְעוֹלָם תְּסֻדָּה 'for his steadfast love lasts forever' is repeated regularly many times or in Daniel 3 where the Canticle of the Three Young Men is built on the repeated expression εὐλογεῖτε...τὸν κύριον 'bless the Lord'. It is worth noting that, in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus himself prayed by 'saying the same words', as recorded by Mark 14:39.

The second part is dedicated to the presentation of possible traces of the biblical teaching about meditation in the history of the Catholic Church in China. Catholic missionaries taught the Chinese faithful different ways of prayer, and that included different forms of meditation / contemplation. The gathered examples are by no means meant to be comprehensive. They are also not meant to prove that a given meditative practice was directly taken from the Bible, but that it was closely linked with the biblical teaching in a number of ways, even if the Chinese Catholics did not always realise that such a connection existed. On top of this, particular attention will be paid to the Chinese martyrs and their practices of a meditative prayer (provided that the relevant examples will be found).

The paper will conclude with a concise summary of the connection between the biblical roots of meditative or contemplative practices and the ways of prayer which formed a part of the spiritual heritage of the Chinese Catholics throughout the history. A short reflection on how the knowledge of biblical roots can help teach the faithful how to pray in a meditative way will also be proposed.