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Speech by Marianne & Heinz Behnken, Wennigsen, July 22, 2010

(translated from German)

The Prayer of the Heart

Let your mouth become silent, then your heart speaks.
Let your heart become silent, then God speaks.

This is the title of our talk, ladies and gentlemen, and with it we would like to tell you something about the Prayer of the Heart as a way of contemplation. It talks to us from the wisdom of the desert, which is the origin of the Prayer of the Heart.

*Let your mouth become silent, then your heart speaks.
Let your heart become silent, then God speaks.*

It is our intention that our theme should talk to us in such a way that all of us together will be touched by the silence, which leads us into the space of contemplation.

But first of all we'd like to introduce ourselves:

My name is Heinz Behnken. I'm 70 years old and a retired priest of the Protestant church. The Prayer of the Heart has been my spiritual path for 25 years, after ten years of being a Zen adept of the Sambokyoan school. Ten years ago, starting with my retirement, my wife and I built up the "House of Silence and Encounter" (Via Cordis) within the monastery of Wennigsen, and were its directors until we put this work into the hands of others two years ago

My name is Marianne Behnken. I'm 68 years old, my main profession is a psychological marriage and life consultant, and since 1990 I have been a teacher of the Schlawhorst-Andersen school for breath, voice and speech. The Prayer of the Heart has been my spiritual path for 30 years. My husband and I are members of the fellowship community named Via Cordis. This is based in Switzerland and over the last 20 years it has been growing a lot in the German speaking countries of Europe. Both of us are certified teachers for contemplation within this community.

We'd like to start this morning with you in the same way as we do in the Via Cordis community. That is by asking for the presence of the Holy Spirit in chanting the antiphon ABWUN. The old fathers and the mothers of the desert practised it in this way in the Egyptian desert in the 3rd and 4th century, where the Prayer of the Heart originated.

ABWUN is the Aramaic form of ABBA, father, in ancient Hebrew and it has a broad spectrum of meaning, including the female aspect of God. Jesus called God by this name: ABWUN.

Please feel for yourself whether and how deeply you want to get involved in this chanting.

The Lord's Prayer (translated from the Aramaic)

ABWUN

Father-Mother of the cosmos,
procreating birth giving love,
everything YOU create in light.

Prepare within us the space of our heart,
so that we may experience YOUR light and YOUR sound in peace.

May YOUR reality reveal itself.

Let heaven and earth build a new creation,
by discovering YOUR love in ours.

Kindly give to us day after day,
what we need in terms of bread and insight,
for the call of the growing life.

Free us from the chains of our mistakes,
as we also give free,
what binds us to the guilt of others.

Guide us within temptation.

Because YOURS is the kingdom of love and peace,
the fullness of life,
the lively power of rebirth and the sound of the cosmos,
which beautifies everything time over time.

I do confirm this with my whole being. Amen.

I The origins of the Prayer of the Heart

Have you already caught yourself by surprise praying? What exactly is it that happens in such a moment? And *how* is it that praying occurs in this moment? People talk about a spontaneous impulse coming from within. The wording is like: "I could not do otherwise." Or: "It came to me directly from within the heart ..." Or: "...It came over me ..." Or: "...I don't know where it came from, it just happened ...".

Often it is situations of great trauma or some borderline situation within the life of a person, or deeply touching experiences like birth, death of a beloved, marriage, baptism, starting a journey, or reconciliation after a fight, which lead to such a form of prayer. What is so special about such an experience? It is a vivid impulse, which is not intended, goes beyond my will and my comprehension and which takes hold of me in the sensing to be heard. The spontaneous power, talking to me and touching me, moves my soul and makes me experience security and trust full of hope. Christians believe that it is the power of the Holy Spirit of God (called "Ruach" in the Old Testament), which works within me like that.

The intention of all spiritual paths of all religions is to lead one into this time and space transcending dimension of security, peace and oneness. Christians are assured of this dimension by the texts of the Old Testament and the Gospels. So Christ speaks: "I am with

you all of your days till the end of time." (Matthew 28,20) And: "I let you have your peace and I give you my peace. I do not give to you as the world gives. May your heart not be frightened and do not fear." (John 14,27) And from the Old Testament: "I have loved you for ever, therefore I have drawn you towards me, out of sheer kindness." (Jeremiah 31,5)

Such words from the Holy Bible and similar ones touched Christians from the beginning. So it was also with the fathers and mothers of the desert in Egypt, who were looking for shelter and escape from the Roman occupying power. The words from the Holy Bible were their resources of comfort. The desert became their harbour. There they survived, there they remained waiting, as hermits alone or in colonies. Contrary to what they expected, the desert was not only a place of fear and horror, of demons, and spirits, but also and above all a place of intense nearness to God and of experiencing God in prayer. They expressed all their power, their longing, their devotion in ejaculatory prayer so typical for them, like: "Help me, oh Lord!", "Kyrie eleison", "Oh Lord, have mercy on me". It is the 3rd and 4th century after Christ. - The Prayer of the Heart is born, a specific spirituality of the desert with a history of deep impact: The Hesychasm. (Hesychia = stillness of the heart)

The original Hesychasm stems from a certain practise of penance, prayer and meditation of the fathers and mothers of the desert, who retreated to the Egyptian desert from 300 after Christ's birth onward. They lived there in solitude or in communities and they orientated their way of praying along the scriptures of the Old and New Testament. They did express their personal longings with short prayers or prayers of one word. Two principal types of praying evolved: asking for help, and asking for forgiveness. Often these were taken from verses of the Psalms.

The praying people followed the advice of Jesus: "Pray without interruption." (Luke 18,1) This way the practise of "rumination" (ruminatio) evolved, and from that the ever ongoing prayer. Doing this, the praying people could experience becoming one with the content of the word, and beyond that to fall silent by becoming one with the word.

From the longing to merge with Jesus during daily life and to lovingly become one with God, the next step emerged; prayers directed personally to Jesus, one-word-prayers and the quick prayer of the beginnings. The praying people took guidance from the scriptures of the New Testament: "Jesus, beloved master, have mercy on me!" (Luke 17,13) Or: "Lord, son of David, have mercy on me!" (Matthew 17,13) From this the prayer known as "Jesus-Prayer" emerged in its classical form: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me."

As a standard form of prayer the first quote stems from Saint Dositheus from the 6th century: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." Parallel to this classical form the simple Name-Prayer is also practised: "Jeshua", "Jesus Christ", "Christ", "Kyrios".

The Prayer of the Heart was propagated beyond the desert of Egypt. Around 600 AD John Climacus (of the ladder), at St Catherine's monastery in the Sinai peninsula, developed a comprehensive teaching about spiritual life in his well known work, "The ladder of divine ascent". First being a hermit and then later abbot, he intensely promoted the teachings of the Prayer of the Heart. "The beauty of prayer cannot be learnt from the teachings of someone else. It has its own master, namely God." - "I sleep, but my heart awakes. Close the doors of your cell for your body, of your lips for your words, the inner doors for your soul." - "If a word in prayer gives you comfort and speaks out to you, stay with it, because your guardian angel wants to pray with you."

In the 8th century Hesechius, abbot of St Catherine's monastery in the Sinai, also composed 200 teachings in the form of proverbs "On sobriety of mind and prayer." - "Prayer needs awareness as the lamp needs the wick" - "Beware that no unworthy thought arises in your heart." - "With every breath practise awareness, the Jesus-Prayer, and the reflection upon

death in all humility." - "In such a way serenity of mind and the Jesus-Prayer complement and enhance each other. Full awareness strengthens the uninterrupted prayer, on the other hand the prayer enhances full awareness and serenity of mind." Besides the ongoing proclamation of the name of Jesus, spiritual serenity and attentiveness is a condition for reaching "Hesychia" (Greek: Hesychia = stillness), which is demanded again and again by the fathers and mothers of the desert. In this way the Hesychast can achieve stillness of heart und linger in it. Stillness, serenity and silence saturate him.

From the 13th century onward the history of Hesychasm enters a new important phase. By then the prayer had found its way to the Athos (holy mountain in Greece) and taken root there.

Leading testimonies of the Hesychastic movement are the scriptures of the monk and abbot from Athos, Nikophoros the Hesychast. They set a new course in the teachings and education. He became a ground breaker of the so-called psychosomatic method with his booklet "On serenity of mind and control of emotions." He gives practical and specific rules especially for beginners who lack a guide for the soul, which lead to calming down and concentrating the mind. In this he makes a connection between physiological reflections with rules for controlled breathing techniques, and the continuous calling to Jesus. Till today his teachings are fundamental for learning how to do the Prayer of the Heart:

"The kingdom of God which is present in you, demands you to know it and to get hold of it, by the science of experience." - "First of all your life has to become calm, free of worries and peaceful with all that is. Then enter your cabin, lock the door, sit down in a corner and obey my words exactly. As you know, we cannot breathe out our breath without the heart, the heart being the bearer of our life and the warmth of the body. The heart draws in the breath to let its own warmth flow out to the outside by breathing out.... Sit down, as I said before, focus your mind, draw your breath in through the nose; as this is the path the breath takes to get down into the heart. Force the breath to move down to the heart in the moment of breathing in. When you hold on to it down there for a while, you will experience the joy which comes out of it." - "Train the mind not to leave the heart quickly. In the beginning it will not like this inner restriction and constriction. But when once accustomed to it, it will not demand outer movement anymore. For the Kingdom of God is within us." (Luke 17,21)

**Practise according to Schlaffhorst-Andersen:
Breath - primal rhythm of creation
Heart - center of man**

II The practise of the Prayer of the Heart

The inner touch with the divine creates a mental space, where I am fully awake, present with all senses. Out of this attunement I start praying. Praying with body, mind and soul, praying with all that I am and which is a part of me. I collect my mind and invite it to be fully present, to stop all remembering, all planning, all wishful thinking, and to fully surrender to the present moment. Within the presence of God I become present. I am fully there. I am there - totally!

"Feel the body, experience your feelings, allow your inner attunement, completely follow the inner movement, the rhythm of your breath, listen to your heart beat: *become* whole, become *whole*. Do not differentiate between body, soul and mind. Be *whole*. Be whole. And feel the core: your heart. In it everything comes to the point. *There* I am whole. Arrive in the heart, completely! The heart sees the whole, in the heart I am connected to everything and everyone. I listen within the heart. Prayer starts in the heart of ITS own volition. Yes, when I

am in the heart, then I *am* in the prayer. Then it is as if the prayer was spoken to me. God speaks and the heart listens. More precisely: The silent God fills everything with silence. To see Him in His calmness means to rest yourself.” (Bernhard of Clairveaux)

The heart is the natural organ for relationship. Prayer doesn't *create* relationship, but prayer *is* relationship. The most humane part of people. In the Heart-Prayer the subject-object duality is in reality transcended into a being with each other. God is not a counterpart, just as the person is not an object in the world. Instead both act in a kind of 'togetherness', 'within each other'.

As long as I differentiate, a bridge is needed, the word of the heart. By putting my life into the right perspective, it has the power to lead me into Gods presence, where I don't need words anymore in pure contemplation. Every person has the desire in their heart to get into this state of contemplation, and to stay in it. “Our heart is restless, until it finds peace in you” (Augustin). That's why it is difficult for many people to recognize that the Heart-Prayer, contemplation, is not a state, but a path. And the Heart-Prayer is not a path leading *to* God, but rather a path *with* God. Let's look at the dynamic of this path and see how it works in practise.

Once a person has decided to follow the path of the heart, the question arises which is their own personal word of the heart. There are three options to find it: 1. He receives it from his spiritual teacher. 2. He discovers the word is already accompanying him. 3. The word comes to him once he has asked the question: Which quality of closeness to God have I experienced in my life so far? By naming this special quality, he has found his personal prayer. He can stay in this word lifelong. But it is also possible that this word changes or is replaced by another. You have to talk to your teacher to clarify this decision.

In our own practise we prescribe five basic steps, which could be helpful to lead the student on his path to the heart. We assume that everyone has already found his heart word.

- I am supported
- I am uplifted
- I breathe and through this become present
- I can feel the middle within my body
- I set my heart word into the breath flow and give my full attention to the center within me

Each one of our courses, all our work with groups or individuals, starts with these basic steps. They are the basic practises and requirements to achieve this basic attitude of contemplative prayer. They accompany the student lifelong.

In addition to that we orient ourselves to the basic attitude that the desert fathers developed and applied in practise.

1 The attitude of attention (concentration of mind in the core of the body in a state of peaceful love, without special emotions)

2 The attitude of detachment (apatheia) (stay in pure attention; impartiality, free from judgments; instead be amazed and accept; give all emotions, pictures and thoughts into the mantra)

3 The attitude of attentiveness and vigilance of the heart (nepsis) (stay in the center of the heart in an attitude of vigilance of the will; observance and keeping complete silence in body, emotions and spirit)

4 The attitude of soberness (stay in openness for the pure presence of the divine without demands and ideas; bridge the abyss between the worldly existence and the hereafter; experience the union in all soberness as a gift)

With this attitude it will be easier to let myself into all the dimensions of my life (rage, despair, anger, envy, enthusiasm, ecstasy, sexuality, death, sorrow, senselessness, humility) whatever comes up in the foreground and surprises me in my daily life that is not in my control. So it is not a contradiction to experience this path as *via purgativa* (path of purification), a *via illuminativa* (path of enlightenment) or *via unitiva* (path of integration) Because this is a process of continuous repetition and deepening and never ends.

Heart Prayer exercise: You in me – me in you

III From the Heart Prayer to Contemplation

The Heart Prayer is the oldest form of a specific prayer practise in Christendom. That is why it could significantly influence the later prayer traditions in the east and west, although the theological and religious developments in both parts of Christendom were very different. In 1054 there was a big split between Rome and Constantinople, between the Catholic and Orthodox churches, with crucial consequences on the mystic-monastic traditions on both sides. The Heart Prayer developed into *the* prayer form in the East, while in the West – apart from the Gregorian chant – a form of abstract contemplation became very important, represented prominently with Hildegard of Bingen, Master Eckhart, Johannes Tauler in the Middle Ages, but also hundreds of years later with Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

Since the foundation of the first monastery on the holy Mount Athos in the year of 963 the Heart Prayer practise has been the primary form of prayer not only in the monasteries on Mount Athos, but in all churches of the Orthodox church. It was further developed and deepened into the Jesus Prayer through the work of the great theologians like Gregor Palamas (13th century) and Starez Paisie Velicikovski (18th century). After that the big reformation and awakening movement within the Orthodox church stopped. But it still had considerable influence in Russia right up to the 19 century, for example on the thinking and working of Leo Tolstoy and F.M. Dostoevsky. The sincere account of a Russian Pilgrim”, anonymously written, is an especially significant document of the renewal movement in the middle of the 19th century in Russia.

The Athos was always endowed with the spiritual identity of the Orthodox Church. It remained so into the 20th century and its spiritual influence has been clearly growing again since the collapse of Communism in Europe in 1989.

In the West it is different: The path of mantra prayers including the Heart Prayer has never been part of the prayer practise. A form of praying evolved instead that is strongly influenced by the apopathic theology of Saint Dionysios Areopagita. Apopathic is the opposite of cataphatic, meaning: "The only thing I can know about God is that I don't know anything." If you strive for the mystical vision, leave the perception of the sense organs and the thoughts, all senses and cognition, everything unreal and real, and strive without insight for union – as much as possible – and rise with all that is above being and recognition. When you are free from everything that was holding you and pure in complete relaxation (ecstasy) and you have dismissed everything and released everything, then you will be raised up to the 'super-being' ray of the divine darkness. In the West the scriptures of the Dionysios Areopagita were by far the most read in the Middle Ages.

Master Eckhart refers to this when he writes: the most powerful prayer is the one that comes from a lone mind. The lonelier the mind, the more powerful, dignifying, worthy, useful and complete is the prayer." No image makes God or His qualities accessible to us. And if an image remains within you, you would never become one with God, and therefore there should be no form in your heart, nothing should be hidden there, that cannot be discovered and thrown out" .

The transition from the Heart Prayer into contemplation is a flowing one. Contemplation means a silent, formless, free will, still abidance in the presence of God. Con-templum, is a "being with" God in the temple of the heart. The heart doesn't think, it doesn't differentiate. It listens, it is moved, it prays.

From the speaking of a name, there will be a listening of the name. From the listening there will be an abidance. The end of all longing.

Contemplation is embedded in the lectio divina, that is practised in four steps: oratio (prayer) – lection (reading) – meditation – contemplation.

To sum up: Contemplation is not a condition, but a path. Whoever has experienced the grace of contemplation is drawn to a life in contemplation. At the end of a time of prayer, be it in one's own room, or be it in a group, the question always arises regarding the ethical consequence. Who is served by contemplation, who does my prayer serve? Does it serve my personal ego, my small 'I', or does it serve the people at my side, does it serve the world in which I live?

In conclusion I summarize:

The contemplative person
considers the experience as arena close to God

The contemplative life
calls for the most vulnerable and critical openness

There are times of agonizing drought, emotional suffering
times when the person thinks he has lost God.

The contemplative person has recognized
that the inner world reaches deep within, much deeper
than the wounds and breaks that he sustained.

The contemplative person
can penetrate to the sanctuary in the soul
where love lives.

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Wenniger Hefte zu Kontemplation und Spiritualität

Heft 1 Das Herzensgebet, Seine Wurzeln – seine Anfänge

Heft 2 Eros – Inspiration – Leidenschaft auf dem geistlichen Weg

Heft 3 Das Herzensgebet und Geistliche Begleitung – Impulse aus der Wüst