

Excerpts from **John Cassian *Conferences***

This document has been put together by R.A. Baker, Ph.D.
for classroom use only. My notes are in this Arial font. The text is downloaded
from: <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3508.htm>

R.A. Baker
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Chapter 3

How pure and sincere prayer can be gained.

And therefore in order that prayer may be offered up with that earnestness and purity with which it ought to be, we must by all means observe these rules.

First all anxiety about carnal things must be entirely got rid of; next we must leave no room for not merely the care but even the recollection of any business affairs, and in like manner also must lay aside all backbitings, vain and incessant chattering, and buffoonery; anger above all and disturbing moroseness must be entirely destroyed, and the deadly taint of carnal lust and covetousness be torn up by the roots....

[Clear your mind...relax...close your eyes...breath deeply (inhale...filling your lungs, hold it for 5-10 seconds, then slowly exhale) Do this 3-5 times. This actually lowers your heartbeat and blood pressure, helping to relax your mind]

then first there must be laid the secure foundations of a deep humility...the soul kept free from all conversation and from roving thoughts that thus it may *little by little begin to rise to the contemplation of God* and to spiritual insight.

For whatever our mind has been thinking of before the hour of prayer, is sure to occur to us while we are praying through the activity of the memory.

[Again, clearing your mind is THE most difficult thing to do. Chapters 4-5 just go over our need to be cleansed from sin...Just reading the text above fills your mind with junk. You cannot think about and focus on your sins, failures...THAT will consume your mind. The Kingdom of Darkness would prefer that you spend 30 minutes repenting rather than 10 minutes of *sitting at the feet of the LORD who is filled with loving kindness and NOT hung up on your sinfulness. He KNOWS our sins better than we do...believe me.*

LOL.

It has been 25 years since I last read *Conferences*. Chapter 6 is very interesting because Father Isaac tells a story of another monk who was doing what I warned against above...trying to beat the sin out of himself...but a demon was pushing

him. You could go read it for yourself.

I am trying to pull only the essence from the work, but it is a good story:
see *Conferences* 9 chapter 6, or *Conf* 9.6...

<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/350809.htm>]

Chapter 7

A question how it is that it is harder work to preserve than to originate good thoughts.

Chapter 7 is more about how difficult it is to quiet your mind. It even works against you if you try to bring back to your mind great thoughts that may have helped you in a previous good time of prayer.

Chapters 10-15 go over various types of prayer: supplication, thanksgiving, intercession, etc.

Chapter 18 - 23

the Lord's Prayer.

This chapter opens with a wonderful sentence, but then goes into a basic commentary on the Lord's Prayer. It is good, but not what we are focused on. The opening sentence is below:

And so there follows after these different kinds of supplication a still **more sublime and exalted condition which is brought about by the contemplation of God alone** and by fervent love, by which the mind, transporting and flinging itself into love for Him, addresses God most familiarly as its own Father with a piety of its own.

Chapter 25

Of the character of the sublimer prayer.

This prayer, though it seems to contain all the fullness of perfection, as being what was originated and appointed by the Lord's own authority, yet lifts those to whom it belongs to that still higher condition of which we spoke above, and carries them on by a loftier stage to that ardent prayer **which is known and tried by but very few**, and which to speak more truly is **ineffable**; which **transcends all human thoughts**, and is distinguished...**not by**

any sound of the voice, but by no movement of the tongue, **nor utterance of words**, but which **the mind enlightened by the infusion of that heavenly light** describes in no human and confined language, but pours forth richly as from copious fountain in an accumulation of thoughts, and ineffably utters to God, expressing in the shortest possible space of time such great things that the mind when it returns to its usual condition cannot easily utter or relate. And this condition our Lord also similarly prefigured by the form of those supplications which, when he retired alone in the mountain He is said to have poured forth in silence, and when being in an agony of prayer He shed forth even drops of blood, as an example of a purpose which it is hard to imitate.

Questions:

1. What have you read in this excerpt that reminds you of earlier readings?
2. What concepts have you recognized?
3. Why didn't Cassian (or Isaac, the monk) explain the concept more fully?

It is interesting that Benedict instructed his monks to read these passages, yet they say very little about the concept of *contemplative prayer*. This again makes me think that they taught the important concepts orally rather than in writing, *disciplina arcani*.

Years ago I read that copies of Clement of Alexandria and Origen could be found in the caves of many monks. **This is the path for contemplative prayer to find it's way into the monastic movement.**

Socrates Scholasticus's *Ecclesiastical History* (Book VI, Chapters 7–9), written in the mid-5th century. Socrates provides the primary historical narrative

of the "Origenist Controversy," which directly links the desert monks to these specific writings.

The Tall Brothers: Socrates identifies four prominent monks in the Nitrian Desert (known as the "Tall Brothers") who were "greatly devoted" to the works of Origen and Clement.

Monastic Libraries: He records that when Bishop Theophilus of Alexandria turned against these monks, he accused them of holding the "errors" of Origen. This led to the official condemnation of Origen's books, which were widely found and read in the monks' caves and cells in the regions of Nitria and Kellia.

Historical Discovery: Tura Papyri discovery.

In 1941 archaeologists found a large collection of works by Origen and Clement hidden in a cave near Cairo, confirming they were physically kept and protected by early monks.

"Rufinus and the Tura Papyrus of Origen's Commentary on Romans," Henry Chadwick, *The Journal of Theological Studies* (Volume 10, Issue 1, April 1959, pp. 10–42).

In this foundational paper, Chadwick meticulously analyzed the newly discovered Greek papyri from the Tura quarry cave against the surviving 4th-century Latin translation of Origen's work by Rufinus of Aquileia. [\[1, 2, 3\]](#) Because Rufinus was notoriously known for "cleaning up" or modifying Origen's text to protect it from accusations of heresy, the 1941 discovery allowed Chadwick and other patristic scholars to compare Rufinus's Latin directly with the original Greek text physically preserved by the Egyptian monks. [\[1, 2, 4, 5\]](#)

Other Related Works by Henry Chadwick

If you recall reading a broader book rather than a journal article, Chadwick also continuously integrated the realities of the Tura discovery and the deeply intellectual culture of Alexandrian monasticism into his larger volumes, such as:

Alexandrian Christianity (1954): A book of selected translations of Clement and Origen that he edited and annotated with J.E.L. Oulton right around the time the Tura fragments were starting to be heavily analyzed. [\[1, 2\]](#)

Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition: Studies in Justin, Clement and Origen (1966): A highly praised study exploring how early

Alexandrian theology merged Greek philosophy with Christian faith, bridging the very concepts that would later fuel monastic contemplation. [1, 2, 3] You can read the original abstract and access his landmark 1959 study via [The Journal of Theological Studies on Oxford Academic](#). [1]

Other secondary sources that popularized this narrative in the late 20th century include Derwas Chitty's *The Desert a City* and Samuel Rubenson's *The Letters of St. Antony*, which argue that the early monks were far more intellectual and well-read in Alexandrian theology than earlier legends suggested.