

Is Prayer in Trouble Today?

Vatican II has opened windows in the Church. New life, like a second spring, is stirring in many places within the Church. Curiously enough, however, the area of prayer sometimes has suffered in the changes. In the move toward people in the world, toward a deeper social consciousness, and toward being Christians who will stand up and be counted in racial demonstrations and peace marches, a real piety-void has been created in the lives of many Christians. Some persons find the old prayer forms difficult, if not meaningless. And so we ask here: Why is prayer a difficulty in this time of change?

I would like to suggest three reasons. The first reason is that prayer is always difficult. It is a dreadful thing to wrestle with a jealous God for our very lives and to enter the Cloud of Unknowing and struggle there for survival, even though we know that in losing the battle we are saving our lives. From our own point of view this is because we are afraid to be loved, even by God who is faithful, and we will go to any lengths to avoid a real encounter with Him.

But prayer is particularly difficult today for a second reason. We don't know where to find God. He is absent, in eclipse. He is silent, to the point where some say He is dead. Prayer is a response to God, but where does He speak? Who has heard the voice of the Lord? I recall a young girl, now a happily married mother, who once said the God whom she tried to love never talked back to her, and she could not stand this. Prayer was all uphill, and eventually it became too much for her. Efforts to contact Him seemed forced, artificial and contrived. This is one of the basic reasons for the piety-void. The prayer forms we have inherited are largely addressed to a God who can be known and loved apart from our fellowman. Rosaries, litanies, devotions and formal prayers at the back of the missal fit this category. Many are uncomfortable with these kinds of prayer. Why? The fault is not entirely their own. They have a different mentality today from past generations, and forms of devotion

haven't kept pace. These old prayer-forms have become separated from the Christian reality expressed by post-Vatican II. This is why we live in a God-forsaken epoch.

But can we find God in each other, in the black militant, in peace-movements and anti-poverty programs? The answer of Vatican II is a resounding "yes." The transcendent God has entered our world in the Man, Jesus. He has identified Himself with the human. He lived and died, but also rose from the dead and lives now in His People. "In Him," says St. Paul, "we have access to the Father." Christ is the way to the Father, and we can see and touch Him, because He lives in our fellowmen. We must, of course, beware of a precipitant identification of Christ and our fellowmen. Even the Risen Christ remains Himself, the Man of the gospels who was so incredibly good, the Man of mystery who let Himself be glimpsed here and there in His Easter appearances. It is this Christ to whom we speak and with whom we go to the Father. He has become one with His People and is coming to full stature in them and with them. But the God we wish to contact in prayer is **in but beyond** ourselves and our fellowman.

Men have always needed images and concepts to identify God and address themselves to Him. The imagery of the past has been tied up with a two-story world, God up there and man down here. Vatican II has united these worlds and located God squarely

in our midst, in the human. The good news of the Gospel is Emmanuel, **God with us and God for us**, so that in loving men we love God. Our prayer imagery, therefore, needs overhauling in this direction.

The third reason for our difficulty in prayer follows closely on the perspectives we have just indicated. We are caught up in the realization of the historical and evolutionary character of the kingdom of God. We refuse to stand apart and merely “watch” this process. We yearn to get involved, to contribute to the passage from the old to the new, to add our efforts to building the kingdom of God on earth. This is all to the good, but where does prayer fit into this context? Peaceful prayer, withdrawn from the hurly-burly of the world, is hard to hear. It is hard to take time out and make room for prayer. The danger for today’s working Christian is no longer to be “holier than thou” but to be “worldlier than thou”

So prayer is in trouble, not only because of its own peculiar difficulty, but because of the times. But what are we going to do about it? Should we simply grit our teeth and resolve to pray more? Or should we create “happenings,” get out the guitars and read Gibran’s *The Prophet* instead of the New Testament? Neither solution is adequate. I propose a two-fold solution.

First, the mystique of prayer.

We deal here with nothing less than the development of true spirituality. What is true spirituality? It is the Gospel rather than the law, life rather than religious exercises, being rather than performance. Who are the great spiritual men of our time? They are the Gandhi’s and the Martin Luther King’s, whose greatness lies in the strength of their spirit, in their freedom and love, in their cutting out a path chosen not because it is popular but because it is right, in their ability to say “no” to matter, to pressure, to human beings, and to the attrition of daily effort. These are men

who live by the Holy Spirit of love and fortitude. The Spirit has taken over in their lives so that they mature as loving human beings. They are not role-players, servants of the establishment, people who go through the motions of religion. They have traversed the conversions that put them in touch with their deepest selves, who accept others because they have learned to accept themselves, and who love others for the same reason. They are men who have integrity and are in touch with life, men who have truly been transformed by the living grace of Christ.

Yet techniques are important too, and one such technique, that we can use, is the development of a new imagery for thinking about God. I suggest that we return to the Gospels where we find Christ and the Father revealed. There we see Christ moving about in our world, witnessing the Father’s love for men in a world, where the Father seemed just as absent as He does in our contemporary world. “Who sees Me sees the Father,” says Christ, and yet in the moment of His greatest anguish, He could cry out: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?” Christ has ascended to the Father, but only after He mapped out the whole fabric of reality, the reality that includes His continuing presence among us. He is where men are, and He speaks to us now in the Scriptures and in the Eucharist. We must reflect on these truths, with the New and Old Testaments in hand, and little-by-little meaningful concepts and images, the magnificent Scriptural imagery of revelation, will become part of us. We shall have our own experience of the Father and the Risen Lord, not likely one we can communicate to others; but the experience will be real. And this will be our prayer life, becoming **lovingly aware** of a Presence that is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and this loving awareness is prayer.

Why do we have such difficulty “picturing” Christ or the Father? It is because we are afraid to be loved. It would be easier

to believe in a God of duty, who demands recompense from us. A God of love, who wants to give Himself to us, is to us incredible and unimaginable! Our sin today is our hopelessness and unwillingness to take God at His word and our distrust that the effort to respond is worth it all. We are weary and timid, so we don't take the first step. We lack hope, the pre-condition for all prayer. We have to want God and trust He will give us Himself. We have to crawl out of our little shells and refuse to hide in our own isolation.

But how do we communicate with God? By words, thoughts, or acts of the will? The answer is: by all these ways. We begin with the lips, we join words with the mind, and the fullest development of prayer occurs when mind and heart are one, when heart speaks to heart. Thus, prayer is not chatter, It is silence. It is the response of the whole person to the reality of the Incarnation present among us. **Prayer is awareness of God's presence in the Church and the world, in people, in the words of Scripture and the sacraments, especially in the Holy Eucharist.** This awareness is not purely intellectual; it is an affective response, the mind prompting desire. Such awareness can occur in the midst of work, on location, as it were, or it can occur in reflection, in the silence of a church or at home.

But how shall we insure that it does occur? One wonders how long anyone can continue a good life without the awareness of prayer, especially when the going gets rough, when frustration meets our best efforts, when we are not appreciated for the good we do. Being good people is only the beginning, but it is the place to start. Our search for God should begin by seeking what is good and true and beautiful in every encounter with the people who come into our lives. We need discernment to know what to seek, otherwise we shall identify our interests with God's, rather than *vice versa*, and we shall end up by loving ourselves and not God. To be able to

find God in our daily encounters we do need **explicit** periods of prayer in our lives. But what prayer? And for how long? And where? These are questions each one must decide. You do not tell people who love each other how they must speak to each other. You don't tell an artist or a musician how much he must practice to maintain perfect sensitivity to his art.

We need reflection, reflective reading, Bible reading in our lives. Reflection gives us the opportunity to hear God speaking, to encounter Him in His objective Word. What He says (what we realize as we reflect) may call for submission, a cry for help, a celebration, joy or any human response. That is prayer! It is encounter with God, but an encounter that contains a bit of conflict. We need the Word of God to "jolt and counter us, to give us perspective in our situation, to judge us and give us hope."

Finally, we pray as a Christian community, and this prayer *par excellence* is the Eucharist. The Mass celebrates life. It takes our secular worship, our daily spiritual sacrifices, our poor efforts to love, and explicitates this life as worship of the Father in and with Christ and His brothers. The Mass is summit before it is source. We go to Mass to encounter Christ, with the elements of our daily life about us, with song and joy and love in our hearts.

We have set down some of the difficulties and some of the elements of a solution to the problem of prayer in our lives. We seek a renewal of prayer life in our own culture and theology. We refuse to be artificial, to center our Christian lives in mere routine religious acts, or to make prayer a mere defense against the world. Yet we recognize that we must pray, on the job and by withdrawing from the maelstrom of activity. We must begin this search with life, and let life drive us to our knees. Some of the traditional practices of prayerful Christians will take on new coloration. Recollection will

not necessarily mean withdrawal but presence to the Lord Who comes to us at work or play as well as at worship. Silence will mean listening, tuning in to reality, hearing what our neighbor is saying, because Christ speaks to

us through him. Finally, solitude will create space in our lives where we can be ourselves, alone with the Spirit who draws each one uniquely and personally to the Father!