

New Seminarians and Now Prayer

Introduction

A beautiful synthesis of the elements of Christian holiness is found in the *Constitution on the Church*. Charity is set down as the be-all and the end-all of Christian spirituality. How is it developed? A general principle is given, then specifics listed. The general principle reads as follows:

If that love, as good seed, is to grow and bring forth fruit in the soul, each one of the faithful must willingly hear the Word of God and with the help of His grace act to fulfill His will.¹

The word of God is the link between God and ourselves, whereby we listen to God and do His will. In this double action consists our Christian life.

Theoretical Considerations

Where does prayer fit into this context? It is our willing hearing of the Word of God. It is the response of faith and charity to the God who reveals Himself to us in love. It is contact with God and the experience of His presence. C. S. Lewis puts it clearly:

Prayer is either sheer illusion or a personal contact between embryonic, incomplete persons (ourselves) and the utterly concrete Person. Prayer in the sense of petition ... is a small part of it; confession and penitence are its threshold, adoration its sanctuary, the presence and vision and enjoyment of God its bread and wine. In it God shows Himself to us.²

Prayer is not mouthing of words, or intellectual inquiry. It can be isolated and studied as a specific moral act, commanded by charity and elicited by the virtue of religion. Concretely, however, it is the articulation of the whole spiritual life, the expression of our personal relationship with God, the affirmation of the vertical aspect of the life of grace. It is the act of living knowledge of God which can properly be called biblical faith.

Prayer is a response, hence basically passive. We pray the way God gives us to pray. It is a contemplative act of receiving and consists in approval, gratitude, openness, complacency. This is obvious in the act of contemplation. But even the prayer of petition is more receptive than active, it is the beggar's act, the manifestation of our needs before God that He fill them. We should not think of petition as "gimme"; this is a child's prayer of petition. Adult petition is openness to God, the acceptance before God of one's creaturely status and one's total dependence on God. Contemplation is this acceptance come to term, totally lived, so that there is only a slight, distinction between perfect poverty of spirit-perfect openness-and contemplation in St. John of the Cross. Far from being a superficial act of the intellect, a mere look or abstract understanding, contemplation is a total acceptance of God to the complete renunciation of any competitive selfishness. It is the insight of love, felt-knowledge or wisdom that is born of likeness.

Contemplation is the experience of the new identity of the Christian, who lives no longer himself but as Christ in Him (Gal. 2:21).

Is this response always conscious and explicit? Must one attend to God directly and consciously in order to have true prayer? The answer is yes for formal, explicit prayer. This is the classical concept of prayer-elevation of the mind and heart to God, conversation with God, speaking to Him. But there is a second moment in love's response, expressed symbolically in external action, and this is properly called implicit prayer. It is the keeping of the Word of God which implies and expresses externally one's willing listening to the Word. This is the prayer of action, the active side of charity. It is putting the gift of charity to work, as the good

Samaritan did (notice without any explicit reference to God). It consists in an act of concern that presupposes the contemplative love of complacency and takes it a step farther. Such acts are the biblical charity of Martha in the Martha-Mary story in contrast to the biblical faith of her sister Mary (Luke 10:48-32).³ Biblical charity is rooted in loving union with Christ; otherwise even heroic acts are “sounding brass and tinkling cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:3). When these acts are incarnations of charity, they are implicit prayer.

They are implicit prayer, not because they contain moments of explicit prayer. There may well be such moments of silence and adoration, of contemplation in the midst of action. But even without this conscious awareness of God as a parallel act or a diffuse atmosphere in the mind, the action itself is a response to God, expressed in deed rather than in thought, and by that taken that much more of a response of the person. Action is more expressive than thoughts or words. Authors designate this virtual prayer the prayer of engagement or involvement.

Explicit and implicit prayer, contemplation and action, are thus mutually dependent operations, two different expressions of the one union of charity. They not only lead to each other in rhythmic interaction; they imply each other and exist together as two aspects of the same Christian activity. There is no hearing of the Word without doing it, no doing it without hearing.

Our incarnational theology helps us to recognize implicit prayer as true prayer; i.e., as response to God. God speaks, not only in sacred word and sacrament, but in all secular activity, in other people and in events. The Christian commitment to earthly tasks is a response to God revealing Himself. It is seeing the world in faith and love, recognizing the divine dimension and Christian meaning in all that is, and reacting accordingly. In a more eschatological perspective, when God was

conceived in His transcendence as dwelling in inaccessible light apart from the world, it was more difficult to see action as implicit prayer. Today we can see (formal) prayer and action as two modes of faith and love: prayer is being with God and action is doing for God. Each implies the other.

The Christian come-of-age, for example, the secular Christian of the New Theology, the man mature enough not to need God as a problem solver and fulfiller of one's needs is not one who has given up prayer. He simply prays differently, implicitly rather than explicitly, and more incarnationally than his forebears. If he is truly what he purports to be, he has indeed reached the ideal of Christian growth, a state we have traditionally called habitual recollection. He finds God in all things, in work as well as prayer, according to an old Ignatian formula.

But the height of this achievement sounds a warning to all of us engaged in training seminararians to pray. The “religionless” Christian appeals to seminararians today. They are reading Bonhoeffer and Robinson more than Leen or Lehodey. The priest of tomorrow wants to find God, not just in the gaps of interstices of frenetic activity, but in his ministry. He wants to be sanctified by his ministry, as Vatican II tells him he should. Thus he has no patience with a contemplative spirituality which puts the sole value on encountering God in solitude away from people.

While today's seminararian willingly accepts implicit prayer, he does find explicit prayer a problem. The attitude is due not only to the intrinsic difficulty of praying to an absent God who does not speak; the disenchantment is rather a by-product of a whole approach to Christian life, one that is masculine, active, communal and secular. To a this-worldly Christian who sees his vocation as building up the kingdom of God in human institutions the “elevation of the mind and heart to God” appears to be a distraction from

the real business of his life. Some forms of prayer retain significance the Liturgy, for example, as a witness of faith, or reflection on the Scriptures as a propaedeutic to life. But prayer as prayer does not appeal to the pragmatist, secular Christian. The piety void is witness to a loss of confidence in vocal prayer, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, and formal meditation.

An older generation believed that the apostle should alternate his efforts between prayer and work, that work is sterile without the support of prayer. Prayer was thus the “soul” of the apostolate in the famous Chautard synthesis. It created the sacred world of encounter with God, where one was sanctified, and work took place in the secular world where the stored-up spiritual energy was spent. To the modern seminarian this is a discredited, dichotomous thinking. Rightly, I believe, he says that charity, not prayer, is the soul of the apostolate, and that God is to be found in the only real world we have, the one which is both sacred and secular. But wrongly, in my opinion, he thinks he can cultivate the charity that is concern without any or with very little attention to deepening his contemplation, his act of complacency. He underestimates the role and value of explicit prayer.

A careful evaluation of the Bonhoeffer ideal shows that it is not achieved without the double effort of prayer and work, of responding to God and by direct attention to His Word as well as carrying out His will. Dom Chapman’s formula is still valid: If you would pray well, you must pray much; if you don’t pray much at least pray regularly, and you will pray well.

But how does he do this? Where does he begin? Should the prayer of engagement be the focus of his efforts, or should he retain the central position of the prayer of withdrawal in silence and solitude? Should the heart of his formal prayer be the Liturgy or his daily meditation? And how much

meditation must there be, and what kind? Where should he pray and for how long? These are some of the questions we must ask. We know what we want, a spirit of prayer, a man of God who not only has an abiding sense of God’s presence in his life but a docility to His slightest motion. We seek to help in the achievement of a genuine personal relationship with God in the interior and exterior life of the future priest. Can we suggest at least the broad lines of a program?

Practical Applications

Where should the seminarian’s program begin? I suggest that it start with implicit prayer, not only on the lower levels of the minor seminary, but even in college and theology. I do not mean that the prayer of engagement will ever be the exclusive prayer, but that conversion begin there and that explicit prayer grow out of daily life. This is to begin with the secular—with one’s studies, sports, recreation, apostolate—and let the sacred acts evolve out of all of this.

I suggest this for both psychological and theological reasons. Emotional maturity is prior in nature and even in time to true spirituality, Emotional maturity roughly coincides with the practice of the moral virtues, with the traditional purgative way, whereas the spiritual or interior life is properly speaking the exercise of the theological virtues, where we have located both implicit and explicit prayer. But implicit prayer as commanded acts of charity is immediately and directly the practice of moral virtues.

Action, Rahner has written recently, comes before knowledge. He writes:

Action (today) is not experienced as the logical consequence of knowledge; rather, knowledge is experienced as the event of self-giveness present only in action.⁴

This is true even of the theological relationship. The loving knowledge of God that is the fruit of the gifts of faith, hope and charity is actually dependent for its expression

and development on interpersonal relationships. Every spiritual director knows that most difficulties in the spiritual life are basically emotional ones, caused by the immaturities, the self-centeredness, the poor self-concept, the inability to relate to others that plague the average Christian. Perhaps this is why Pope Pius XII told seminary directors to stress the natural virtues first and only later the higher reaches of the spiritual life. Cardinal Newman, too, is witness for this principle. He finds the reason for the coolness of our love of God in the unwillingness to enter into deep human relationships. He wrote:

Perhaps the reason why the standard of holiness among us is so low, our attainments are so poor, our view of the truth so dim, our belief so unreal, our general notions so artificial and external is this, that we dare not trust each other with the secret of our hearts. We have each the same secret, and we keep it to ourselves, and we fear that, as a cause of estrangement, which would really be a bond of union. We do not probe the wounds of our nature thoroughly; we do not lay the foundation of our religious profession in the ground of our inner man; we make clean the outside of things; we are amiable and friendly to each other in words and deeds, but our love is not enlarged, our bowels of affection are straitened, and we fear to let the intercourse begin at the root; and, in consequence, our religion, viewed as a social system, is hollow⁵

For reasons such as these we place involvement, fraternal charity, and apostolic commitment as the first emphasis. The incarnational law of grace is to go to God through creatures, from the visible to the invisible. I am not recommending mere legal or moral perfection, much less more psychological fulfillment. But the search for human fulfillment in a truly Christian way is the first order of business, a search which Pope Paul VI in his encyclical on *The Development of Peoples* tells us is as much our obligation as is our own salvation. We are by no means preaching a purely secular humanism, not if we believe Matthew 25. The

spiritual life is a process that begins the nitty-gritty of life in this world. Our approach is spiritual because this world is God's world, wholly redeemed by Christ and therefore containing Christ, and we make the signs of His presence in the world symbols that evoke His presence. We begin in a dialogue with finite thou's, the persons we meet, the world we serve, and in them we encounter the Infinite Thou. The dialogue is horizontal, but a redeemed horizontal that implies the vertical.

If one has any doubts about the validity of this approach, he might reflect that putting on the Lord Jesus Christ in this way is true purification, genuine *kenosis*. Traditional spiritual writers like St. John of the Cross teach purification as the first step on the spiritual life. The depth of one's contemplation—his loving union with God—is in direct proportion to his self-emptying. What surer purification can anyone undergo that unselfish dedication to one's vocation, unrelenting service of one's fellow men? We are far from activism here, the kind of activity that is mere self-projection and the expression of one's own needs. The action we are defending as a response to objective values freely chosen and approved. It is, as we have said so frequently above, an implicit response to God. St. John of the Cross taught an either-or spirituality: God or the world. Today we favor a both-and approach, God and the world, a reaching for "the 'Beyond' in the midst of life."

Our involvement, therefore, is not purely horizontal. It originates in the depths of our spirit, where the Spirit dwells, and it does not come from the periphery of the imagination and emotions. And it goes to the heart of creation, to realities that are at once human and Christian. There is a rub, however. The question every busy person must ask is: Am I involved in the real world or in a world of my own making, whose center is

myself? Is my commitment a search for God or self-projection, self-seeking?

Can such involvement exist without formal prayer? We think not. We believe that activity that is “fed and nourished by a wealth of meditation”⁶ has much more chance of opening lines of communication with God than activity without periods of withdrawal and reflection. But we are confident that such activity will drive us to our knees, as Bishop Robinson has suggested, and that the proper order of emphasis is life first, then prayer. One of the malaises of our times has been the divorce of prayer and life. The fact is: we pray as well as we live, though it is also true to say that we live as well as we pray.

How then shall we express our explicit prayer? We prescind from the Liturgy for the moment and consider here all other formal prayer, from the traditional practice of the presence of God to methodical meditation. We can call this prayer reflection. It consists in direct and explicit attention to the Father Who comes to us in the Word, to Christ our brother and way to the Father, to the Holy Spirit who is the animator of our souls. We step back, out of the maelstrom of our busyness, whether only for a moment or for an extended period of ten minutes or an hour, and reflect on the deepest meaning of our lives, on the sacred element in our existence, on life caught up in the Trinity. It is a direct implementation of our being with God and is simply attention to Him.

This prayer is basically listening, and this is why Christian prayer begins best with the Bible. Here is where God reveals Himself. The effort of prayer is to get beyond the words to the Speaker, to the personal Thou. All reality is material for such prayer—a dollar bill, an impending problem, the beggar at our door—because its deepest meaning is revealed in Scripture. But the more we get to the *Deus semper major*, to God in His intimate life and transcendence, the more perfect the prayer. Meditation is thinking about God,

intellectually or imaginatively. Affective prayer presupposes real knowledge and moves to the proliferation of acts of the will. But eventually words and affections are silent. God cannot be encompassed by our little acts, and we are close enough to Him to realize this. So we simply stand in loving attention to Him in His total otherness. This is contemplation. Contemplation at least in momentary flashes in our formal prayer is the essence of real prayer.

The goal, you see, is explicit contact with God and His world. Some pray contemplatively from the beginning—they are self-possessed enough, silent and alone enough, to stand in His presence and be satisfied with just being there. But most people are too caught up in a noisy exterior and cannot penetrate this region where God dwells without conditioning the heart and mind by reflections. But if we will to have this contact we are praying. Even distracted and tired people who cannot “think” can sometimes sit in His presence—or better, kneel there in a prayerful attitude—and they will draw nourishment from this silence. It matters little where one imagines God to be. It is difficult to find Him in our time especially because He is the absent God, the hidden God who no longer speaks to His children. Some find Him most easily in the community of prayers, some in the depths of one’s soul, or in the tabernacle. But as long as there is search for Him, there is real contact, there is experience of God.

The Modern Experience of Prayer

Is such experience possible in our day? Assuredly, because it is essential to Christian life. In the last analysis it is the only way of getting to know Him. The basic question of prayer is: Who and what are you, Lord? This answer does not come out of books. Prayer is necessary to keep one’s sights clear, to appraise one’s past, to plan the future, to open oneself in humble petition for light and

strength. But above all it is necessary because God is God and we are His servants; we owe Him adoration, worship and love.

The questions we can profitably ask, then, about formal prayer are not the why or the what but how. How can we help seminarians achieve this experience? What forms of prayer are most successful? Where is the experience likely to take place in our time and culture? Some observers seem to think that minute meditations suffice, that insights in the midst of one's work are enough. Cultivate a sense of total presence to what you are doing and moments of prayer will occur. This, no doubt, is living to the full, being present to reality. Someone has said that few people are really present to what they are doing, which is the reason why few people really live. Traditional spirituality tells us, however—and we must retain our traditions even though we adapt if we would not be lost in the sea—tradition tells us that we cannot make real contact with God on the fly, not at least until we are fully possessed by the Holy Spirit. Classic authors on meditation demand a half-hour as a minimum for real prayer. St. Ignatius says 15 minutes suffices... for a mortified man. We need the help of quiet and forms and structures to possess our souls in peace for prayer. The forms are variable. One priest told me of a friend who makes the Stations of the Cross looking out of his downtown window on the pavement below and watching the people scurry by. Sidewalk engineering, a frequent occupation of retreatants of the old style, could be meditation. Youths today find group meditation; for example, the *collatio* method attributed to St. Ignatius, a fruitful means of prayer. We should search out effective ways of prayer with our students. The goal is simple: How do I best find the presence of the Lord? To have this goal is simple: How do I best find the presence of the Lord? To have this goal and persevere in it during the time of prayer is really to find Him, whatever the

feelings, whatever the dryness or sensible devotion, whatever the forms used.

It would be well to understand more about this experience of God.⁷ Spiritual directors should be experts in prayer. They should know, therefore, the typical crisis that occurs with progress in prayer which has come to be called beginning contemplation, for which St. John of the Cross' three signs are extremely helpful. An English parish priest, Father Darlrymple, maintains that the seminary must bring the student to this form of prayer before he goes out into the ministry or he will never persevere in prayer. But we have not the time to, go into all these things at this juncture. It is enough to say that prayer is a very personal thing, it is really *my* interpersonal relationship with God and it will grow organically according to my own history, personality, talent and grace.

We have described two elements in the life of prayer, implicit prayer or engagement and explicit prayer or reflection. Have we said all? We have left the best part for last. Both the types we have not the time to go into all these things at this juncture. It is prayer, the Liturgy. Liturgy celebrates life and is itself a sacred moment and place where we meet Christ in the community of His followers. This is why the Liturgy is not only the source but also the summit of Christian life.

First, the Liturgy unites action and prayer in organic unity. It is a participation in action, a symbolic action, that grows out of and expresses one's daily life. But it is also direct reception of the Word of God served us as nourishment at the double table of the Sacred Scripture and the Liturgy.⁸ Thus it unites secular and sacred, since it begins in the secular—with man's life with his fellow man and under a beneficent Father—and it celebrates that life in sacred symbols. The Liturgy is an argument for the principle of approaching prayer through action rather than words. God's interest in us goes beyond the

moments we spend in chapel. *Gloria Dei vivens homo*—the glory of God is a man fully alive, as St. Irenaeus wrote so modernly. The Liturgy is only a moment of a man's life, but it is the highest moment because it saves our involvement from becoming over-involvement. It saves us for contemplation. But it demands involvement, too, for a liturgy that is not socially concerned, that is not missionary and ecumenical, that pays attention only to Sunday and not the rest of the week is no liturgy at all.

The *Constitution on the Liturgy* sees the Liturgy as the solution to the antinomies of Christian existence:

It is the essence of the Church that she be both human and divine, visible and yet invisibly endowed, eager to act and yet devoted to contemplation, present in the world and yet not at home in it. She is all these things in such a way that in her the human is directed and subordinated to the divine, the visible likewise to the Invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to the city yet to come... Day by day the liturgy builds up those within the Church into the Lord's holy temple ...⁹

Father George Tavard in a perceptive essay in *The Church Tomorrow* maintains that the reform of religious life will take care of itself if religious make the Liturgy the heart and center of their daily lives. With a vibrant, meaningful Liturgy renewal and adaptation will take care of themselves.

Conclusions

To conclude, then, prayer is still a very much "in" subject in the formation of seminarians. What it needs, as Father Anthony Padovano pointed out, is a "new emphasis and new idiom." There is no substitute for the inner transformation, for the relationship of loving knowledge to the God who has called us together in Christ, for our total response to God in daily action and contemplation. Post-conciliar seminarians must not pray less and act more; they must pray more integrally, more organically. "Presence" may be a magic word we can use, or "response" or even "experience." We will have to re-evaluate our prayer schedule, make adaptations, perhaps shift the center of emphasis. We must demand high standards of achievement in the classroom, in the community room, in the chapel, otherwise how can we teach the prayer of engagement? At the same time we will have to say that good works are not enough, that we cannot become so engrossed in the business of life that we forget or minimize formal prayer itself, that when all is said and done we want our seminarians to be men of experience of God. "This is eternal life, that they may know thee, the only true God, and him whom thou hast sent, Jesus Christ" (John 17:3).

¹ *Constitution on the Church*, Chap. 5, n. 42.

² C. S. Lewis, "The Efficacy of Prayer," Advent Paper.

³ Barnabas Mary Ahern, C.P., "Martha, Mary and Religious Life," *Ascent*, 1965, 9-17, reprinted from *Vita Religiosa*, 1 (1965), 59-67.

⁴ K. Rahner, "The Unity of Love of God and Love of Neighbor," in *Theology Digest*, 15 (1967), 87.

⁵ "Sermon on Christian Sympathy" cited by F. Kerr, O.P., "Theology in a God Forsaken Epoch," *New Blackfriars*, 46 (1965), 672.

⁶ *Constitution on the Church*, n. 42.

⁷ K. Rahner's analysis in *The Dynamic Element in the Church* is immensely helpful.

⁸ *Ministry of Priests*, n. 8.

⁹ *Constitution on the Church*, n. 2.