

## The Place of Prayer in Community

Prayer and community are the two supreme values in Christian and religious life. Prayer is the privileged expression of the love of God, the vertical dimension of Christian existence. Community is fraternal love, the horizontal dimension.

Creating community, either in the form of friendship in the family at home, for example, in the convent or the congregation, or in the form of apostolic love in the larger communities of one's work means to recognize our common unity in Christ and to break down the barriers that separate man from his brothers. Friendship and apostolic love are variations on the one theme of fraternal love or community.

Thus creating community at home is our first apostolate, and any apostolate worthy of the name is the expression of the charity of Christ in tangible, worthwhile ways in the larger communities of our lives, such as the school or the neighborhood. Whether at home or abroad, therefore, community is the this-worldly aspect of Christian life. Community is not some Platonic abstraction, a kind of super-personality we admire and cultivate; nor is it synonymous with common life or common exercises. Togetherness is a means to the end of common unity, communion, *koinonia*. Community as communion is an end in itself: to love persons as persons is as ultimate as the love of God. We can never use persons; they are images of God, to be loved with the same love as we have for God.

*Perfectae caritatis* recognizes the ultimacy of prayer and community by setting them as the goal of all religious under the rubric of contemplation and apostolic love. Paragraph 5 states:

... the members of each community should combine contemplation with apostolic love. By the former they adhere to God in mind and heart;

by the latter they strive to associate themselves with the work of redemption and to spread the Kingdom of God.

These two goals are not disparate. "The entire religious life of the members of these communities should be penetrated by an apostolic spirit, as their entire apostolic activity should be animated by a religious spirit." (*Ibid*, n. 8) Prayer itself illustrates this interaction. It is *always* communal. By definition a Christian is a member of Christ, joined to Him by faith and Baptism and having access to the Father through Him. Hence prayer without Christ is inconceivable. Union with Christ is likewise communion, *koinonia*, with other members of Christ. For this reason Christian prayer in and through Christ, is communal by its very nature. Even in the most intimate, private prayer the Christian cannot disassociate himself from his brothers; they are part of him and he takes them wherever he goes. Thus Christian prayer always has the dimension of community, either explicitly, as in the liturgy, or implicitly, as in private prayer.

### Unity and Prayer

The organic unity of prayer and community, however, is an unstable one, easily threatened by imbalance. Today community is the "in-value." The pendulum has swung from an excessive verticalism and the individualism of a Jesus-and-me piety to human, social, and secular preoccupations. Religion has become horizontalized, and the prayer aspect seems to have suffered in the change. Religious not only seem to be praying less, though perhaps giving more in the apostolate; some even question the very possibility of direct, personal encounter with the Trinity or intimacy with Christ. Theocentric spirituality has given way to an

anthropocentric Christian life, one that is person-centered, community-centered, world-centered. Slogans, such as “I find God in other people” or “My work is my prayer” have replaced the aphorism of a St. John of the Cross, to “live in the world as if only you and God existed.” In the name of the apostolate the chapel is deserted and human involvement canonized. While the spectre of activism and the heresy of good works may be detected in some of what is passing for apostolic love, the signs of the times indicate that, exaggerations aside, the human, this-worldly approach to God is the particular call of the Holy Spirit in our day. But this approach can never minimize prayer.

It is easy to caricature the old approved way as minding God but neglecting people and the new approach as human concern but practical atheism. The old formula was prayer first, action second, and the movement was from God to people. The new formula is life first, i.e., community first, and prayer second, so that the movement is from community to prayer. What Vatican II said about the liturgy, that it is source and summit of Christian life, is true of prayer in general. Neither the old nor the new approach denies this. The old approach puts the stress on the source, the new on summit, and the different emphasis serves to construct a different spirituality.

In the past spiritual exercises, performed in common according to a monastic schedule and bolstered by a rigorous asceticism of silence, solitude and unworldliness, were considered to be the dynamo for the apostolic life. Religious communities were structure for a life of prayer, and the apostolate was a consequence. Today religious communities want to be immediately apostolic, to be outgoing and comparatively unstructured, in order to be more free for the service of love for which they were established. Except for daily Mass and the limited Office and perhaps some few common prayers the trend is to leave the

prayer life up to the individual religious. There is no intention of minimizing prayer, only the reducing of the quantity of prayers. Prayer remains a necessary support of the apostolate, but it is seen as the fruit of an apostolic life.

## **New Trend and Religious Life**

Is this new trend viable and effective? Will the apostolate suffer? More important, does the new system give prayer its rightful place as an intrinsic and ultimate value in religious life? The present paper attempts to answer these questions.

The thesis of the paper is that community is the matrix out of which authentic prayer is developed. This is to say that today at least we should begin with life, with being Christians, men for others, men dedicated to breaking down barriers and creating community, and let prayer evolve out of this human effort. Prayer in this context is the celebration of community in Christ and only in the second instance and by a reverse action the source and nourishment of the apostolate. Christian life has always been circular, a rhythmic, ever-ascending spiral that moves between reflection and action, prayer and apostolate. The new system differs from the old only in identifying the point of departure as community rather than prayer.

This approach is as old as the scriptures. From Amos onward, the prophets decried the separation of religion and life; they condemned formalism, ritualism, ceremonialism, and preached that the true worship of God consists in justice and decency and moral virtue. The Epistle of St. James recapitulates this tradition: “Religion pure and undefiled before God is this: to give aid to orphans and widows in their tribulation, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.” (1:27) The sayings of Our Lord underline this same secular worship. The new commandment, concern for the least of Christ’s brethren as concern for Christ

Himself, as beautifully depicted in the Matthaean Last Judgment, the presence of Christ wherever two or three are gathered in His name—these are indications that Christian life is human before it is divine. Indeed, “how can he who does not love his brother, whom he sees, love God, whom he does not see?” (1 John 4:20)

People are the entree to Christ. Where does the Risen Lord dwell now and where is He revealed? The first answer is in people. He has assumed us all and He dwells in every community of His followers, wherever two or three are gathered in His name, whether it is the Church from Abel to the present, the Church of all the baptized, the Roman Catholic Church, or the *ecclesia domestica*, the domestic church of the Christian family or the religious community. Each person finds himself in the *koinonia*, as every person comes to life through interpersonal relationships; he also finds Christ there. This is one of the challenging new perspectives of Vatican II, to see community as the place of encounter with Christ. Too often we have seen community as an obligation, as bringing Christ where He was not present before. This is a valid optic, because we are bearers of Christ’s love. But it is only one side of the picture. We also go to community to meet Christ. The entree to prayer, in other words, is community. The ability to contact Him depends on our ability to know and love our brothers, to gather in His name. Prayer, as we shall see, is nothing other than the explication and celebration of this Christian vocation.

Our lives are thus one life in Christ, a search for Him who lives on in His members. The transcendent God is immanent in the fellowship of Christ. The Christian does not have two lives, one a life with God, the other life with his fellow man. He lives at the point of intersection of the divine and the human, the vertical and horizontal, the upward and the outward thrust. Love of God is love of neighbor, and love of neighbor the love of

God, precisely because Christ, the Incarnate Word Who identifies Himself with people, is the center of life. A famous theologian once saw a banner in the sanctuary of a sisters’ chapel that read: “God is other people.” He remarked: “There should be a common after ‘other’: ‘God is other, people.’” Actually, both aphorisms as intended are true, and our task of uniting them is considerably facilitated by seeking God through community.

This approach, however, may strike some as being too human. It seems to minimize the transcendent vocation of the Christian to know and love the persons of the Trinity themselves, “to know the Father and Son Whom He has sent” (John 17:3). It seems to trade our Christian birthright of intimacy and direct friendship with Christ for a mess of pottage of community with other mere men like ourselves. It seems, in short, to displace prayer, even to rule out prayer in the Christian life. After all, if we love God by loving our fellowmen, why should we seek to go beyond our fellowmen?

One might answer this objection by pointing out that loving our fellowmen in truth is not that easy, that, unless we pray, we will not persevere in the love of man. We shall neither recognize our neighbor as a member of Christ nor make the sacrifice necessary to be faithful. Michel Quoist writes: “To love hurts, you know, son, for since the fall—listen, carefully, son—to love is to crucify self for another.” How can we live with our pervading selfishness and consistently overcome human weakness without motivation from above?

### **Prayer As Ultimate Value**

But this answer gives prayer a mere functional role and fails to meet the objection. Prayer is an ultimate value, unquestionably the ultimate value of religious life, however apostolic the congregation. The answer to the objection, therefore, must go deeper. It must recall the fact that genuine community

terminates in Christ Himself and fairly cries out to celebrate this fact in prayer.

The validity of the new spirituality, in other words, hinges on two conditions: (1) that the search for community is truly a living of the Paschal Mystery, hence the exercise of altruistic, self-forgetting love. This means that it implies a genuine asceticism; (2) that prayer, both communal and private, does occur.

First, asceticism. How does the religious intent on building real friendships at home and fostering human values in the apostolate avoid the danger of pure humanism? How does the new way avoid getting bogged down in a purely horizontal existence? The basic answer is *unselfishness*. It is difficult to tell when our love for our fellowmen is real. Classic spiritual writings have delineated the limitless possibilities of self-deception. Modern psychology in its discovery of the unconscious merely extends the field. What looks like genuine love and service may well be the fulfilling of dependency needs, the need to be needed and approved; what looks like apostolic love may well be the compulsion to dominate others. The older solution of ascetical theology was to suspect every human affection, even to root out every human desire, and to cultivate a very "spiritual" outlook. But today a more human, functional asceticism is replacing this spiritualized way. It consists in cultivating openness, communication, facing one's own insecurity and isolation and breaking out of the straitjacket of petty securities in the effort to relate to others as person to person. This is the effect to grow into maturity rather than avoid dangers. But its essence is to forget self and be for others. Its actual forms are still largely to be created. They probably will look more like a self-improvement program in a modern psychology text than the advice of the old ascetical manuals. Striving for skill in the techniques of dialogue, for example, may well

replace abstinence or even fasting as a typical practice.

### **Christ as Center**

The other condition for the new spirituality is that community is celebrated in the liturgy and that there are times for private reflection in one's daily life. The difference between a Christian community and a humanitarian organization is the explicit recognition of Christ as the center. Many humanitarian organizations may indeed be objectively more Christian than those who confess the Lord Jesus Christ in explicit terms. But we glory in the knowledge of Our Lord Jesus Christ and in His saving mysteries. Our lives live out that knowledge, open in human, fragmented terms, in the guilty-guilty of the human condition which inevitably includes human weakness. We have summed up this life in terms of creating community. But if our lives are really in Christ we shall want to celebrate this fact.

The liturgy proclaims our life. It acknowledges the Paschal Mystery being worked out historically in our midst. It reminds us of our history, of God's saving action in the past; it proclaims what is to be, when Christ will have achieved His full stature in His people and God will be all in all. We celebrate the liturgy, moreover, with signs and symbols of daily life, to integrate chapel and classroom or marketplace, to give unity and integration to the multiple interests and concerns of daily existence. The center of the liturgy is Christ, but the whole Christ, Head and members, and by our participation we express our faith that He is also the center of life itself.

The celebration must also be a vital one that comes out of our lives and expresses what we are endeavoring to do. It is mystery, but meaningful mystery and not an escape. Liturgical committees that plan the daily liturgy have an important function in religious communities. We can well hope that the

bishops and the Holy See itself will grant greater freedom and encouragement to religious to experiment with forms of daily Mass and the divine Office and with liturgical actions such as the Sacrament of Penance. Private confession has fallen upon hard times. Is it not the time for at least, occasional communal celebrations of Penance, wherein the community would confess their sins and their redemption together in joyful celebration?

The liturgy would seem to supply what is necessary for communal prayer. There is room for occasional para-liturgical celebrations and for other common prayers and devotions as well, but these will be limited. Liturgical celebrations, moreover, are not restricted to one's own convent. Religious belong to other communities such as the school or the parish as well as the local convent, and it is proper that they celebrate these communities as well. It would be shortsighted to break down barriers between individuals only to erect huge walls between one community and another, to isolate community from community. We are, indeed, in solidarity with all men, especially the poor and dispossessed, and just as we bring them to our prayer, so we should enter into prayer with them. But private prayer, individual and personal as it is, should generally be private, not only as to place but even in the times chosen. This is true even when small groups opt to meditate together or engage in communal "review of life." The support of times and even place may be necessary for the

young or at certain times, such as the transitional period between the old and new today. Experimentation in this matter should be courageously undertaken and carefully evaluated. Christ always prayed alone; the Christian too needs private conversation with Christ and the Father according to his own needs and possibilities and under the movement of the Holy Spirit. The community like a good mother, does well to step aside, as it were, and simply encourage and guarantee the right to private prayer.

A religious community that is too preoccupied with its works to take time out to celebrate the liturgy together, religious who are too busy to make room for reflection and explicit encounter with Christ and the Father would make one wonder if Christ is really the center of their lives. If they are united only in function or for efficiency, there is no need for them to celebrate their community of love or the headship of Christ in their midst. But if Christ is their inspiration, then, however busy they are, they will know that prayer is the pearl of great price in their lives. Prayer will serve to put them on guard against self-deception; it will purify their love of each other, inspire the forgetting of self and generous giving. But these are its functional, lesser roles. Above all prayer will be the explicit assertion of what the apostolate and Christian life is all about, namely, "the excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ" for whom we have suffered "the loss of all things." (Phil. 3:8-9)