

The Place of Prayer in Community Life

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 this 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 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, 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.

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.

The Swing of the Pendulum

The organic unity of prayer and community, however, is always 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 anthropocentric Christian life, one that is person-centered, community-centered, world-centered. Slogans, such as "find God in other people" or "My work is my

prayer” are at the opposite end of the spectrum from the advice 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, every sign of the times indicates 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 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 structured 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, even though in this new system it emerges as the fruit of an apostolic 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.

Community the Matrix Prayer

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.

In a true sense 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. James recapitulates this tradition when he writes: “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 Jn 4:20)

Encounter with Christ

People are the entrée 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 any and 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 live 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 entrée to prayer, in other words, is community. The ability to contact Him depends on our ability to know and love our brothers, to gather together in His name. Prayer, as we shall see, is nothing other than the explicitation 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 comma 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.

Finding Christ through Prayer

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” (Jn 17:3). It seems to trade 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. “The proper study of mankind is man.” (A. Pope)

One might answer this objection by pointing out that loving our fellowmen in truth is not that easy, that unless we pray we will neither recognize our neighbor as a member of Christ nor undergo the *kenosis*, the self-emptying to love Him rightly. What makes people lovable is precisely the fact that they are Christ. Michel Quoist writes: “To love hurts, you know, son, for since the fall—listen, carefully, son—to love is to crucify self for another.” What makes people lovable is precisely the fact that they are Christ. And how can this fact make any difference to us unless we *realize* who Christ is, what He is and where He dwells? This realization is the fruit of prayer.

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.

Community and Asceticism

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, to spiritualize our motivation. A more human, functional asceticism is replacing this spiritualized way. It consists in cultivating openness, reaching out to other people, 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 effort to grow into maturity rather than sidestep possible pitfalls by withdrawal and negation. But its essence is to forget self and

be for others. Its actual forms are still largely to be created. The practices probably will look much 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.

Prayer and Community

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 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 in human fragmented terms, in the nitty-gritty of the human condition which inevitably includes human weakness. We have summed up this life in terms of creating community. If our lives are really in Christ we shall want to celebrate this fact.

The liturgy represents this fact. 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 is communal, because community is our life. The liturgy must also be a vital one that comes out of our lives and

expresses what we are endeavoring to do. It is mystery, but the mystery must be expressed meaningfully. 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. Communal penance is a case in point. How fitting it is for a community to confess their sins and their redemption together in a joyful celebration of this sacrament.

Private Prayer

The liturgy would seem to fulfill what is necessary for communal prayer in convents. Individual institutes may opt for occasional para-liturgical celebrations, or for limited common prayers or devotions besides the liturgy. 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 short-sighted 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 liturgy, so we should enter into their celebrations. But private prayer, individual and personal as it is, ideally should be private, not only as to place but even in the times chosen. The support of

times or even place may be necessary for the young or new in this transitional period, but it seems to me that experimentation in this matter should be courageously undertaken and carefully evaluated. Like Christ who always prayed alone, the Christian needs to make room for private conversation with God, according to his own needs and possibilities and under the movement of the Holy Spirit and the community could do nothing better than encouraging and guaranteeing this right.

A religious community that was 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 question whether or not Christ is the center of their lives. If they are united only in function or for efficiency, then 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, hence lesser roles. Above all prayer will be the explicit assertion of what the apostolate and Christian life is all about, namely, “the excelling knowledge of Jesus Christ” for which we have suffered “the loss of all things.” (Phil 3:8-9)