

Prayer as Encounter with the Transcendent God

Prayer as dialogue with God is practically synonymous with religion itself.¹ The New Testament presents Christ, not only in constant union with His Father, but praying alone,² usually in the solitude of the mountains (Lk 6:12-13) or the evocative wastelands of the desert (Lk 5:16), looking up to heaven in thanksgiving (Mk 6:41) or petition (Mk 7:34). He calls His followers to the same continual prayer (Lk 18:1), to enter their rooms, close the door and pray to the Father in secret (Mt 6:6).

Strangely enough, however, this imagery does not sit well with Christians today. The Christian has become a “secular, deeply loving, world-affirming, suffering” man,³ and prayer in formal, explicit acts seems to be on the wane. Whereas before prayer was the very “spiritual life” of the Christian, today human life in the city of man has center stage. Action has become prayer, work is prayer, and the sophisticated “religionless” Christian come of age finds it more and more difficult to address a God who does not intervene to solve man’s problems.⁴ He will celebrate the liturgy with his fellows, because this is human communion; he will work in the apostolate because this is the love of God expressed in a tangible way, the only way possible, according to some recent authors, before the Lord comes and we see Him face to face.⁵ Prayer has become horizontalized, flattened out, “the expression of the life of the total Christian”,⁶ a “living out the task of my life, doing the truth, trying to achieve my authentic existence, fulfilling my responsibility to transform the world into the new heaven and new earth, and helping my neighbor achieve authenticity.”⁷

I submit that this can be an emasculation of prayer, and yet that prayer in its traditional sense of converse with God must be composed with the humanistic and secular preoccupations of modern Christians. Prayer, in other words, remains what it has always been; but it needs a contemporary formulation. This paper attempts to indicate some lines of that task.

Prayer as conversation with God presupposes the divine presence in man’s world and the possibility of contacting Him. The Judaeo-Christian tradition proclaims that God has manifested Himself to man. Even before Christ, the all-holy God revealed Himself to Israel and called His people to intimacy with Himself. The transcendent power that primitive man adored and addressed, often in distorted anthropomorphism and magic, was rejected by the prophets and replaced by Yahweh, much as Paul identified the unknown god of the Areopagus as the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 19:22-31). In Christ the Father was fully revealed. Christ is the Sacrament of the Father, the manifestation of God in human terms, the Word of the Father.

Where is Christ to be found now? The Risen Savior lives on in His people and in the cosmos through His Spirit, gathering the community of His followers together in the Church in any of its various extensions listed in Vatican II,⁸ dwelling by faith in their hearts (Eph 3:17), breaking down the middle wall of partition (Eph 2:14), reconciling the world to the Father (2 Cor 5:19), redeeming and judging men *now*. Sole mediator, the link between God and man, the Lord is the way through whom we have access to the Father (Eph 3:12).

Both sacred signs and secular realities mediate and evoke His presence. *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* lists the ways of this liturgical presence in a famous paragraph (n.7). But Christ is recognized implicitly in secular realities, in the human values He has assumed and divinized and made grace-filled signs of His presence. These human values—truth, goodness, peace, prosperity—are not Christ Himself, any more than the sacred signs—the Church, the Scriptures, the Sacraments—are Christ Himself. On the other hand, they are not purely extrinsic indicators of the divine will, having nothing of the Christic presence within themselves. They are part of the Incarnation, part of the ongoing process of the assumption and recapitulation of all things in Christ (Eph 1:10). As such, they are “signs of the times” which we read in the light of the Scriptures as part of God’s Word to us now.

Thus all reality is personal and Christic, because its source and goal is the person of the Word.⁹ Christ the Lord is present in all things, “drawing them to Himself” (Jn 12:32). The believer sees this. He recognizes in the common meal of the Eucharist the person of Christ Who is the meaning of the sacred action. He recognizes the same Christ in the family meal around the supper table, now revealed in the values of love and care which find their ultimate meaning in Christ Himself. In one case sacred signs mediate His presence, in the other secular signs perform this function, and in either case there can be person-to-person encounter with Christ and through Him with the Father. Such encounter is the core of prayer.

Traditionally prayer has been defined as a cognitive or noetic act, variously described as reflection, awareness, attention to God, Who speaks to us first in His Word. It is, moreover, an affective response, the expression of an attitude of the will in approval, thanksgiving, petition, apology. St. Thomas sums up both aspects by defining

prayer as “the interpreter of desire.”¹⁰ Prayer, therefore is always dialogic in character, a “speaking to” and not a mere “speaking about” a divine person. It is encounter with God.

The encounter, however, may be only implicit. If the reflection or awareness does not go beyond the mediations, if the attention remains on the human level of visible signs, for example, on the words of Scripture or the sacred actions of the liturgy, on human community or human values, the prayer is implicit. The reflection may indeed be diffuse in action. Human action insofar as it is human is a non-verbal, symbolic expression of the person acting out of his freedom and love. As long as he invests his person in what he is doing, there will be reflection in the activity and indeed communication. Actions speak louder than words; they express meaning and intentionality. Insofar as they originate in faith and charity, are a response to God and at least implicit encounter with Him.

Prayer is explicit when there is direct confrontation with the divine persons as distinct love-objects, when one goes beyond the mediations to touch the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit in some sense of immediate relationship. The experience of God here is existential and experiential, and not the clear vision of empirical immediacy, yet nonetheless a real “experience” of the unfathomable abyss.¹¹ In both instances there is formal prayer, because prayer is a response of faith and the act of faith terminates not in the objectification but in the Reality of God Himself.¹²

In the examples of the liturgical and the family meal given above, there is implicit prayer whenever the believer gives himself to either celebration in a spirit of disinterested love, when he relates to participating persons in a spirit of fraternity, when he reflects on the meaning of the action and opens himself to the family communion but without consciously and directly thinking of God in personal

address. There is explicit contact if the divine presence is recognized and affective attitudes toward God expressed.

The distinction between implicit and explicit prayer seems to authenticate “worldly prayer” or the prayer of engagement as forms of prayer in its traditional concept. Both implicit and explicit prayer emphasize *personal* involvement, which means relating to Christ in faith and love. The measure of prayer has never been the clarity of perception or richness of feeling, but the purity and intensity of charity, the depth of *kenosis* and corresponding presence of Christ. Contemplation is charity come to term. It remains the summit of Christian life, precisely because it is the sense of the presence or absence of God that is consequent on a high degree of charity. Implicit prayer is a search for this presence and love in the human condition, and as such it integrates both sign and reality, life and prayer. It restates the tradition on prayer in a way meaningful to today’s Christian.

The contemporary Christian sees himself as a being-in-the-world, an incarnate spirit, who does not just happen to have a body but is essentially bodiliness. He can function, therefore, even in prayer, only through the persons and objects around him. This does not mean that he does not have an immediate relationship with God in faith, hope and charity, but that the *entré* and the clothing of this union are visible, tangible, historical realities, which are transcended through the theological virtues.¹³ If prayer is conceived only in abstraction, as the relationship with the transcendent God outside the universe, and is not integrated with man’s life in the world and the human community, it is no wonder that it loses its appeal for modern man.

Schillebeeckx writes:

...Life in-and-for-the-world feeds our understanding of God, as it were; in essence, Christian religious faith means that our concrete existence is a divine promise of salvation. Only from this life in and for the world does God take

on any real content for mankind. If this is overlooked, then one’s religious life threatens to turn, not toward the real and living God but towards a merely notional God; a God, that is, derived from a human experience belonging to the past; in those days the idea had real content, but today, owing to our changed view of man and the world, this content is lost and the notion is just a label which existentially means nothing at all.¹⁴

Encounter with God, therefore, will best be conceived today, not in dualistic terms, with God living in separation from man’s human condition, but as occurring in and growing out of man’s search for human values. Prayer in its pure state of explicit encounter takes its origin in this human matrix and never quite leaves it behind. The *via negativa* as the way to prayer, conceived as the denial of the creature to reach the Creator, needs restatement and overhauling in this perspective of a world which is the intermediary between God and man rather than a competitor with Him. This is not to deny the utter self-despoliation demanded by the Gospel, but to identify it as unselfish pursuit of true values in self-forgetfulness.¹⁵ To seek God beyond the world may be a safeguard against idolatry but it underestimates the ongoing manifestation of God in incarnational realities.

A new theology of prayer must retain the inexpressible, nameless quality of God, His “total otherness,” but at the same time it must relate the divine to the human and present God not in abstraction as a timeless, non-historical Being encountered only by escape from this life but as One involved in the dynamic evolutionary processes of man and his world. We need a new language of transcendence.¹⁶ Process theology may help here, or the theology of a Moltmann which looks at the transcendent God “not at the transcendent horizon of nature” or “in the transcendent subjectivity of man” but in “the horizon of a missionary and revolutionary moment of history.”¹⁷ Transcendence must be related to the human without reducing God to

finitude or dethroning God in favor of human values or human persons. The way lies along the route of reuniting sign and Reality, historical immanence and utter transcendence. For a theology of prayer the way God speaks to us is as important as His intimate being and reality.

In similar fashion, man's response to God's Word must be conceived in more historical terms. Incarnational flesh and blood must be engrafted on the skeleton of the classical definitions of prayer. Word and Sacrament, as well as human, secular values, supply the bodiliness for encounter with God. Prayer must begin with response to the Word of God that comes to man where he is, in the world. All the dichotomies that separate prayer and action, liturgy and life, the divine and the human, are to be rejected. Man's efforts to create community or celebrate the liturgy, to build the city of man or meditate on the words of Scripture are a search for the good, the true and the beautiful, and therefore

at least an implicit search for Goodness, Truth, and Beauty itself, for Christ Who is the ultimate incarnation of these values. The search hopefully ends in explicit contemplation—implicit prayer leads to explicit prayer—but this act of contemplation will always be in the world.

This approach does not rule out the spiritual exercises. It only demands that they be attuned to life. Life itself becomes a listening, an openness to God's Word. A new style of spirituality will emerge, "which nobody really understands or can describe as yet, but which is trying to do away with the dichotomy between religion and life."¹⁸ At no point can the search for God in the human stop, because God is always greater, the *Deus semper major*, and no human value fully expresses Him. Thus the evangelical law, "He must increase and I decrease," will continue to be operative, but by integrating, and not denying, the Christic world in which we live.

¹ Friedrich Heiler, *Prayer, A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion* (tr. S. McComb, New York: Oxford University Press, 1932) xiii-xv.

² Yves J.-J. Congar, OP., "The Prayer of Jesus," *Review for Religions* 24 (1965) 221.

³ Martin Thornton, *The Rock and the River* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965) 77.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself gives the lie to the unwarranted conclusion that prayer has no role in secular Christianity, not only by his personal life of prayer, but by statements like the following: "We must persevere in quiet meditation on the life, sayings, deeds, sufferings and death of Jesus in order to learn what God promises and what he fulfills. One thing is certain: we must always live close to the presence of God, for that is newness of life. ..." *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1953) 243.

⁵ T. Patrick Burke, "God and Neighbor," *Worship* 41 (1967) 165. See also. Sebastian Moore, *God Is a New Language* (Westminster: Newman Press, 1967) 28-30, 62.

⁶ T. Suavet, *Gebete der Hoffnung* (Graz, 1961) 10, cited by G. Mesters, O. Carm., "Valore e forme della preghiera per l'uomo di oggi" (unpublished ms. of. *Institutum Carmelitanum*, Rome, 1967).

⁷ Grace Marie Schutte, S.Sp.S., "Reflections on Prayer and Worldly Holiness," *Worship* 41 (1967) 108-109.

⁸ See Gregory Baum, *The Credibility of the Church Today* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 20-28.

⁹ See Col 1:15-20 and Eph 1:10 and the commentary of Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P., "Proclaiming the Death of the Lord," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 18 (1963) 53-60.

¹⁰ This phrase aptly summarizes St. Thomas' definition of prayer in *S.T.*, II-II, q. 83, a.1.

¹¹ David E. Jenkins, *Guide to the Debate about God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966) 59-60, calls the experience of God "existential"; Jean Mouroux, *The Christian Experience* (tr. G. Lamb, New York: Sheed and Ward 1954) 9-15 calls it "experiential". Both distinguish this interpersonal experience of

subject from the empirical experience of an object. God is not an object, but a presence. For some insights on this difficult question of the experience of God, see P. de Letter, S.J., "The Encounter with God," *Thought* 36 (1961) 5-24; A. Dulles, S.J., "The Ignatian Experience as Reflected in the Spiritual Theology of Karl Rahner," *Philippine Studies* 13 (1965) esp. 475-481; Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B., "I Believe that I May Experience", *Continuum* 5 (1968) 673-685.

¹² *S.T.* II-II, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2.

¹³ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Immediate Relationship with God," *Conclium*, 29 *Opportunities for Belief and Behavior* (ed. C. Duquoc, O.P., New York Paulist Press, 1967) 38-53.

¹⁴ E. Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Celibacy* (tr. C. A. L. Jarrott, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968) 92.

¹⁵ See the re-working of St. John of the Cross' doctrine of the void in Georges Morel, *Le sens de l'existence selon S. Jean de la Croix* (Paris: Aubiez 1960-1961), 3 volumes, passim; e.g. II, 4-48; for indications in a more scholastic framework, see the present author's "The Role of Creatures in the Spiritual Life," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 17 (1962) 226-228.

¹⁶ David R. Burrell, "God: Language and Transcendence," *Commonweal, God, Commonweal Papers* 1,85 (10 February, 1967) 511-516.

¹⁷ J. Moltmann, "The Theology of Hope," *Critic* 36 (1968) 22.

¹⁸ Donald J. Thurman, "Spirituality Crisis?," *National Catholic Reporter Supplement* 4 (28 February, 1968) 10.