

The Problem of Prayer Today

It is no secret that prayer is a problem for contemporary religious. The move toward the human and the secular, toward social consciousness, toward concern for poverty, racism and the questions of peace and war, has seized the imagination of religious, drawn them out of the convents and into peace demonstrations and anti-poverty marches, and at the same time created a piety-void in their lives.

Modern religious find themselves praying less but perhaps giving more. They are oriented to action rather than contemplation, to apostolate rather than to prayer. The vistas of an historical, evolutionary world, of the Kingdom of God coming-to-be through their own efforts are immensely appealing to them. The Teilhardian vision of the universe, for example, or the theology of the future of men like Metz and Moltmann inspire and enthrall them. The young, particularly, refuse to stand apart and merely watch this process; they yearn to get involved, to contribute to the passage from the old to the new, to add their efforts to the building of the Kingdom of God on earth.

But where does prayer fit in this context? Schillebeeckx may insist that contemplation is the heart of Christianity, Chardin may speak of formal prayer as the cherished moments of Christian existence, but in the clamor for action the still, small voice of quiet, peaceful prayer, withdrawn from the hurly-burly of the world, is hard to hear.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 today is no longer to be "holier than thou" but to be "worldlier than thou."

This is one reason for the current difficulty of prayer. A more basic reason however, is intrinsic to prayer. Prayer is always difficult. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, to wrestle

with a jealous God for one's very life, to enter the Cloud of Unknowing and struggle there for survival, even though one knows that in losing the battle he is saving his life.

Kierkegaard wrote: "True prayer is a struggle with God and man emerges victorious when God is the victor." The victorious God is the God-for-us, a God of love who comes only to give Himself and His love to man.

Why, then, the hesitation, anxiety, flight from this Love? The answer is simple. People are afraid to be loved. Their experience does not prepare them for a God who is all giving, unselfishness, benevolence. Who has ever been loved in this way? The God of love, therefore, becomes incredible. He threatens rather than attracts, because most Christians are too insecure, too egotistical, too fainthearted to see anything but the cost of the love of God, the evangelical demand of radical self-renunciation. It is easier to relate to a God of duty, to Whom we could give something but hold at arm's length. We just do not believe in a loving God. We suffer from an emotional hang-up, a hopelessness, a mistrust that the effort to respond is worth it all. We are wary and timid, so we don't take the first step. We crawl into our own little shells and hide and we will go to any lengths to avoid encountering this God. But what is all this but lack of emotional maturity and true spirituality? (For a provocative delineation of these ideas, see Rene H. Chabot, M.S., "The Death of Atheism," *Review for Religious* 27 (1968) 193-207.)

There is a third reason for the difficulty of prayer today: it is a cultural one, particular to our time. God is silent today: He is absent, in eclipse; some say He is dead. Prayer is a response, but God no longer speaks; He has become a silent partner at the other end of a telephone. Efforts to contact Him seem forced, artificial and contrived.

Was it always thus? Past generations do not seem to have thought so. We have inherited their prayer forms, prayers addressed to a God above, at the top of the seven-story mountain, or the God within, at the center of the interior castle. This imagery, we know, expresses truths about God's presence and reality and our relationship to Him. But it may not speak to everyone. It often does not speak to contemporary man, precisely because contemporary man is a different person from his forebears.

Prayer at this Moment in History

Contemporary culture is person-centered, community-centered, and very secular. Our grandparents and parents were individualists, with a clear realization of God's transcendence and the otherworldly quality of Christian life. It was natural for them to address a God in abstraction, because He was real to them. But to modern man the telephone God of the two-story universe smacks of mythology unrelated to his own experience. Modern man sees himself, not as an island, but in relation to others. He is a being-in-the-world whose relationships to others are not by-products of life but the very marrow of his existence. His very identity emerges out of these relationships and never leaves them behind. Thus other persons and the cosmos are part of him. He doesn't have a body; he is a body. He is not inserted as a person into a particular environment; he becomes a person, that is, he is constructed by the way he takes hold of his bodily existence and relates to other people and the world about him. He thinks of himself as a person, not in separation from his fellows, but as one conscious center in a community of relationships. For him, therefore, God will be located in these relationships, or else He will not be real. Thus it is no wonder that some of the prayer forms of the past and some traditional spirituality do not speak to him, and that he finds himself living in a "Godforsaken epoch." (See Fergus

Kerr, O.P., "Theology in a Godforsaken Epoch," *New Blackfriars* 46 (1965) 665-672.)

The problem, then, is clear. Prayer is difficult today because of activism, lack of spirituality, and a culture lag. We need to develop a theology of prayer that takes off from these contemporary problems, according to the directive of Vatican II:

The manner of living, praying and working should be suitably adapted to the physical and psychological conditions of today's religious and also, to the extent required by the nature of each community, to the needs of the apostolate and the requirements of a given culture, the social and economic circumstances anywhere, but especially in missionary territories. (*Perfectae caritatis*, n. 3)

Some would solve the problem of activism by saying that work is prayer. But prayer is not action, nor action prayer, not at least if we use words for what they have traditionally signified. Prayer is not simply our relationship with God, our faith, hope and charity, our union with Him. If this were its meaning, then indeed everything in life would be prayer, actions as well as words, apostolate as well as contemplation. Our whole lives ideally are expressions of the theological life.

Prayer is one expression of the life of faith, hope and charity. It is an encounter with God, a contact with Him, loving awareness of His presence, or indeed of His absence, a sensing of who He is and who I am. It is thus one kind of response to God's coming to us, a knowledge-response that expresses the effective response of praise, need or apology. It is "knowing" God in the biblical sense; it is the experience of God in any one of the manifold human reactions that occur when a person comes face-to-face with the God who reveals His presence in sacred symbol or secular reality.

Thus prayer is not action as such. But exaggeration is possible here. To say, for example, that we know and love God when we pray and that we serve God when we engage in activity separates prayer and action too sharply and creates a dichotomy. Human life

is not that compartmentalized. Prayer and action are mutually inclusive and inter-related. There is prayer in action, prayer “on location” as one recent author describes it. There is action in prayer: much of the time given to formal prayer is really preparing and disposing oneself for the actual encounter with God. We call meditation prayer, even though most of the time is spent thinking about God rather than speaking to Him. Reflection about God or the world of faith is closer to the category of action than prayer. Human action, on the other hand, insofar as it is human, is symbolic and expressive of meaning and intentionality. It can indeed contain moments of explicit awareness of God and that is true formal prayer. But even when it is merely a search for true human values or the building of human community, it is as much search for God as reflection on the words of Sacred Scripture. Thus action can be called implicit prayer.

Contemplation and Apostolic Love

It is well, however, to retain the classical distinction between prayer and action even at the risk of exaggerating the differences. Two extremes are to be avoided: first, excessive separation of prayer and apostolic activity to the denigration of activity as a positive response to God; and second, the blurring of the distinction to the detriment of real prayer in daily life. The concept of action as implicit prayer avoids the Scylla of fragmentation in the first extreme, and insistence on direct encounter with God as the goal and object of prayer safeguards an apostolic life from the Charybdis of activism.

Christian life is more than prayer, even when we acknowledge that prayer is its supreme moment. This is because Christian life is human and historical as well as transcendent. Like the Church itself, according to the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, Christian life is

... both human and divine, visible and yet invisibly endowed, eager to act and yet devoted to contemplation, present in this world and yet not at home in it. It is all these things in such a way that the human is directed and subordinated to the divine, the visible likewise to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come which we seek (cf. Hebrews 13:14). (N. 2)

This text integrates life-in-the-world in the community of one's brothers into the concept of prayer and encounter, that is, into contemplation. Encounter with God too often is identified with certain particular historical forms of contemplation, or with what are conceived to be the forms taught by the spiritual masters, a contemplation in some sense “out of this world.” *Perfectae caritatis* supplies a definition of contemplation which is a corrective against any one-sided view and locates contemplation where it belongs, namely, in the context of apostolic love. In making this twofold aspect the single universal goal of all religious, it asserts both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the organic unity that is religious life:

... 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. (*Perfectae caritatis* n. 5)

Contemplation, in other words, is not restricted to the chapel or solitude any more than apostolic love is limited to the classroom or market place. While each has characteristic expressions, where contemplation exists, apostolic love is present in the same degree, so that in practice one is implicit in the other.

But how does one grow into contemplation and apostolic love? How does one develop union with God in the community of one's fellow men? The answer is by reflection and action, by hearing the Word of God and keeping it, by prayer and apostolate. The way is characterized by search. In the ordinary Christian's life, hence in both his prayer and apostolate, search rather than

achievement is the predominant note. This is why “contemplation,” which connotes rest and attainment of one’s ultimate end, is less apt than encounter or contact with God as the specifying note, the “formal object,” as such. In this pilgrim state contemplation is open-ended, an endless search rather than fulfillment. The Christian is always trying to make contact with God in prayer, trying to find and promote in the most efficient way true human values and fraternal love. Thus we rightly say that he is praying even when his efforts to pray seem to be merely reflections about God, whether in silent meditation, prayerful reading, or listening to the Word of God in the Liturgy. He is encountering God in a human fashion. Similarly his efforts in the apostolate are no less a response to God even when his immediate concerns are merely the improvement of human conditions. God speaks to us in human values, because the Incarnate Word has assumed all that is truly human into Himself. The Son has established the Kingdom among men and has given His followers the mission of cooperating in the recapitulation of all things in Christ. In the truest sense the Christian vocation is to humanize the world. Our efforts, therefore, to discern the good and promote the true in the human community are at least an implicit search for God. The Christian may be aware only of the struggle, the ambivalence, the questionings that are the human condition. Yet the interior dynamism of his prayer and action is God Himself. He is searching for God. In this search, it is important to note that he needs both prayer and action. He needs formal prayer to save himself from idolatry; he needs apostolic action to be authentic. Thus both his prayer and his action merge into one propaedeutic, one search whose goal is contemplation and apostolic love.

Humanism and Asceticism

The way of spirituality presented here differs from past formulations in that it

attempts to take the human condition into account as well as the human manifestations of God in the world. Past formulations were based on the *via negativa*, which can be crudely summed up as the renunciation of the creature in favor of the Creator. Prayer was to be developed by withdrawal, silence and solitude as well as rigorous rejection of worldly comforts. The Christian was taught to isolate God and seek Him alone. The classic way has proved effective in the past. Will a more humanistic approach prove as effective in leading one to union with God? On one condition: that it be based on the Gospel demand of radical renunciation. The essential point of all renunciation is unselfishness; renunciation is the death aspect of the Paschal Mystery, the *self*-denial inherent in the new life of the Resurrection. Material renunciation is one way of promoting unselfishness, but not the only way. In the light of the world view of Christians today, as well as the call of Vatican II to human and secular tasks, unselfish pursuit of human values in the service of persons is more meaningful and, hopefully, just as effective a self-renunciation as the way inspired by the attempt to project oneself out of this world into the other world where God is conceived to dwell in utter transcendence.

The key to a valid prayer life now as always lies in the growth of true spirituality. This means growth in integration, freedom and love. Asceticism enters the picture here. Methodical efforts to break out of isolation and emotional hang-ups, to achieve that freedom and love whereby one will recognize the Truth and love the Good are the indicated asceticism for our times. One example of this approach is to trust ourselves to each other. Long before the psychologists made it a truism to say that our relationships with God are dependent on our interpersonal relationships with each other, Cardinal Newman wrote these words:

Perhaps the reason why the standard of holiness among us is so low, our attainments so poor.... 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. 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 affection is straitened, and in consequence, our religion, viewed as a social system, is hollow. (Cited in Kerr, *ibid.*, p. 672)

In view of the problems of communication in some religious communities it is not out of place to study techniques of dialogue or to utilize group dynamics or sensitivity programs to develop interpersonal relationships in community.

A contemporary asceticism that is positive, functional, and humanistic is the first step in building an authentic spirituality in the modern setting. It will create new forms of prayer to resolve the cultural lag that besets us. The emphasis today on God's immanence rather than His transcendence makes it clear that we must start with life and let life drive us to our knees. True, God speaks to us in the sacred words of the Scriptures and the symbolic actions of the Liturgy. But these are insights into life or the celebration of life. If we fail to search for God in life, we shall never find Him in formal prayer. Religion flows out of life, and the two together join hands in an ascending spirit that reaches up to God. Spiritual exercises retain their role. They are necessary for the cultivation of the reflective side of Christian existence, and they are an affirmation of the ultimate and intrinsic value of encounter with God in the Christian vocation. Formal prayer is thus both functional, a means to insure apostolic love, and an end in itself. It is an act of faith in the privileged call to intimacy and converse with God Himself, "to know the Father, the only true God, and Him whom he has sent, Jesus Christ." (J 17:3)

Communal and Private Prayer

Prayer forms today must be eminently human. Human does not necessarily mean

spontaneous. Given the imperfection and ambivalence of human nature, there must be studied efforts to make room for prayer. This means deciding on programs of communal and private prayer.

Community prayer will be centered in the Liturgy. Forms of private prayer will be simply and flexible and allow for pluralism in times, places, and methods according to each one's needs. Each one will follow the lead of the Spirit: "We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words." (Rom. 8:26) The Scriptures, as God's objective word, are the prime source book. (P.C. 6) Bonhoeffer writes: "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, 1953) 243. Even "religionless Christianity" needs the word of God to judge, to jolt, and to interpret the events of daily life and locate God where He is.

Conclusion

We have set down some of the difficulties and some of the elements of a solution to the problem of prayer in our lives. While we do not wish to center our apostolic lives in the spiritual exercises or to make prayer a mere defense against the world, we recognize that we must pray, on the job and by withdrawing from the maelstrom of activity. Some traditional practices will take on a new coloration. Recollection, for example, will not necessarily mean withdrawal, but presence to the Lord, being "all there" where He comes to us at work or worship. Silence will mean listening, tuning in to reality, hearing what our neighbor is saying, hearing the word of God in the liturgy or in small, group meditations. Solitude becomes creating space in our lives

where we can be ourselves, alone with the Spirit who draws each one uniquely and personally to the Father. Our prayer life basically will be awareness and response to ultimate references, and it will be measured by

how closely it approaches the persons of the Trinity themselves. Prayer, as C. S. Lewis says, is “either contact with God, or sheer illusion.”