

Review of 1999 series on Prayer

We began this series with some statements on prayer. Teresa of Avila defines prayer as 'friendly communication, and frequently solitary conversation, with him who we know loves us' (*Life*, 8.5). We recalled her advice: 'It is for you to look at him; he never takes his eyes off you' (*Way of Perfection*, 26.3). We also recalled also the words of John of the Cross: 'The language which God hears best is silent love' (*Maxims on Love*, n.53). Nearer to our own time, Therese of Lisieux writes: 'Prayer is a surge of the heart; a simple look turned toward heaven, a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy' (*Story of a Soul*). We quoted the following words from Anthony Bloom:

'Prayer is the search for God, encounter with God, and going beyond this encounter in communion ... It arises from the awareness that the world in which we live is not simply two dimensional, imprisoned in the categories of time and space, a flat world in which we meet only the surface of things, an opaque surface covering emptiness. Prayer is born of the discovery that the world has depths; that we are not only surrounded by visible things but that we are also immersed in and penetrated by invisible things. And that this invisible world is both the presence of God, the supreme, sublime reality, and our own deepest truth ... Living only in the visible world is living on the surface; it ignores or sets aside not only the existence of God but the depths of created being. It is condemning ourselves to perceiving only the world's surface ... The human heart is deep. When we have reached the fountainhead of a human being's life we discover that this itself springs from beyond. The human heart is open to the invisible. Not the invisible of depth psychology but the invisible infinite, God's creative word, God himself.

Returning to ourselves is thus not a synonym for introversion but for emerging beyond the limits of our limited selves. Saint John Chrysostom said "When you discover the door of your heart you discover the gate of heaven." This discovery of our own depths goes together with the recognition of the depths in others. Each has his or her own immensity. I use the word "immensity" on purpose. It means that the depth cannot be measured, not because it is too great for our measurements to reach it, but because its quality is not subject to measurement at all. The immensity of our vocation is to share the divine nature, and in discovering our own depths we discover God' (*Courage to pray*, pages 5-6).

It is always God who initiates prayer, yet God is not the object of direct human experience. Experiencing God is something like experiencing light when we gaze at a stained glass window. It is the window which we see, but illuminated by the otherwise invisible light. We experience creation around us and the movements of our own mind and heart, but illuminated by the otherwise invisible God. We long for communion with God. In the words of Augustine: 'You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless till they rest in you' (*Confessions* I.1). We come to know God when we behold creation for creation is a word of God. We come to know God when we listen to the human responses to God found in the various religions of the world. We come to know God when we look at Jesus and listen to him inviting us: 'Come to me and I will give you rest' (Matthew 11:28). We come to know God when we listen to the deepest longings of our own heart for 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). God, Father, Son and Spirit, dwells in us and from the depths of our being the fire of God's love draws us in to enjoy communion with God in love. From God, dwelling within us, wells up a spring that waters our being and murmurs within us: 'Come to me.' Our response to that call is prayer.

In our second reflection, we focused on the nature of love. God is love and so we can expect our experience of prayer to be one of communion in love. The fourteenth century mystic, Julian of Norwich, captures this experience beautifully in the words which she addresses to God: 'God,

of your goodness, give yourself to me, for you are in love with me.’ We also acknowledged that if we persevere in prayer we will come to know ourselves as we really are, for we will come to see ourselves as God sees us. We cannot pray without trusting that God wants to relate to us as we actually are. At the same time we must be ready to face the fact that not everything about us is beautiful. Not yet. We must be ready for God’s love to purify us, however unpleasant such purification may be, for only a pure heart can enjoy the fullness of love-communion for which we long.

In our third reflection we turned our attention to Jesus, reminding ourselves that we are not called to imitate him from the outside, as it were. Rather we are to allow his Spirit to transform us till we can say with Paul: ‘I live, no longer I; it is Christ who lives in me’(Galatians 2:19). Learning to pray is learning to allow Jesus’ own prayer to find a home in our hearts. The incarnation of the divine Word in Jesus demonstrates to us that we are drawn into communion with the Holy One not by withdrawal from the body, from the mind, from thoughts and feelings, but by allowing the Holy One to draw us into the heart of the created world where God will transform us into himself. It is especially in prayer that we say Yes to the communion which God is offering us. It is in prayer that we open our souls to receive God’s offer of himself. It is in prayer that we grow in holiness – a holiness that is expressed in every aspect of our lives. We are all called to holiness, but holiness is not something which we can earn or achieve. We become holy to the degree that God, the one who alone is holy, is dwelling in us in a communion of love which is transforming us into an ever more profound participation in the divine life. It is because God, the One who alone is holy, is present uniting us to Himself, that we are living in this divine communion. In prayer we consciously focus on this most profound dimension of our lives. In prayer we become holy. Prayer is making space for God’s transforming action in our lives. Prayer is giving ourselves, like a child, into his hands. He will lead us along the path of holiness, for Jesus shares his Spirit with us and longs to draw us ever more closely to his heart.

In our fourth reflection we focused on the place of obedience in our life of prayer. We cannot respond to God if we are not listening. We must be determined to want only what God wants, knowing that God wants us ‘to live and to live to the full’(John 10:10) in a communion of love with Him. John of the Cross assures us: ‘The union of love of God is an habitual and loving attentiveness to the will of God’(Spiritual Canticle 28,10). The virtue of humility is also of key importance: knowing that of ourselves we are nothing, but that we are not ‘of ourselves’. Rather, we are held in existence and constantly graced by God who loves us unconditionally. To be humble is to look upon God as Jesus looked upon him, as the one who gives us life: our Abba! Humility is best learned by contemplating the heart of Jesus: ‘Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart’(Matthew 11:29). May we learn to accept ourselves simply as we are and open our hands and our hearts to receive love from God, our Mother, our Father, who made us and who knows us as we really are. Let us believe that God wants to delight in us, and let us relax back from the foolish path of pride. It is God’s love that creates us and holds us in existence. Only God’s love can make us truly beautiful with the only beauty that really counts: the beauty of a soul that is open to love and that gives love simply and truly. Of such is the kingdom of heaven.

In our fifth reflection we got in touch with the longing for God which is central to all prayer. To begin a life of prayer we must be attentive to the invitation of God whose Spirit is drawing us into the very centre of our being where God has made his home as in a temple. To persevere in prayer we must, with awakened and attentive heart, stay in touch with the longing of our soul for God, a longing which is itself a gift of grace. The pull of this longing will draw us into the heart of God. We went on to seek the guidance first of Ignatius of Loyola and then of Teresa of Avila in the early stages of prayer. We noted the importance of spiritual reading as well as the help available from already composed prayers, especially the psalms as presented in the Prayer of the Church. We looked at the practice of examining our day and of spending time imaginatively

entering a Gospel scene. As regards reflective meditation we noted Teresa's advice: 'Progress does not lie in thinking much but in loving much'(Foundations 5.2). We also looked at a simple form of recollection in which we rest in God.

We pray as we are, and so every mood of the human heart can be expressed when we are drawn by grace into communion with God. In our sixth, seventh and eighth reflections we turned to the inspired poetry of the Psalms for they can teach us how to pray, especially when we sing them, as they were originally sung, to the accompaniment of stringed instruments. We looked at psalms expressing wonder, delight, praise, thanksgiving and trust. We then looked at the many ways in which the Psalmist gives expression to his own needs and to the needs of the people. This led us to examine what it is we are doing when we plead with God for ourselves or for others.

Distractions can contribute to a feeling of helplessness in prayer. They can tempt us to give up prayer altogether. In our ninth reflection we looked at various contributing factors and listened as the saints advised us to do what we can to live a generally reflective life and to prepare for our time of prayer. However, with the best will in the world, some distractions are unavoidable. We must deepen our trust in the fact that if we want our heart to be attentive to God, God knows our good will. Above all we must not give up prayer. Though our prayer may not please us, God certainly is pleased that we come to him seeking his love and wanting to enter into communion with him.

In our tenth reflection we looked at what it means to love ourselves and to love others. We are not meant to go to God on our own. The gift of a spiritual friend, a soul-companion, is an inestimable gift for anyone committed to a life of prayer, as is the gift of a wise spiritual director with whom we can be completely open.

We long to share fully in the life of love which is God. Prayer is a journey into God's embrace. In our eleventh reflections we saw that we must not let anything that is not God so possess our soul that we are unwilling to let it go when Love calls us to journey into more intimate communion. We can be confident that God will direct us as to what it is that is holding us back. Let us trust God and respond generously to his inspiration.

We completed our examination of pre-contemplative prayer in our twelfth reflection by noting the importance of silence and of our being able to experience solitude if we are to respond to God drawing us ever deeper into communion.

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Prayer is always a response to God, for it is God who creates us and holds us in existence; it is God who 'has poured his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'(Romans 5:5). The Spirit we receive is the Spirit that Jesus shares with his Father. Through this gift we are drawn to share Jesus' own prayer-communion. Up to this point we were focusing our attention on the kind of prayer which we experience when we welcome the gift of the Spirit but are still controlling our response. In our twelfth reflection we went on to describe the kind of prayer which we experience when we surrender to God's Spirit of love and find that we no longer have control over a prayer which comes to us as surprise and as gift. We began speaking of the first movements of contemplative prayer.

While praying in our accustomed way, we sense that the movement of our prayer is beginning to change direction. Rather than our stretching out towards God, we experiencing ourselves yielding to God as we experience a gentle drawing inward. Father Marie-Eugène writes:

'The soul finds itself calmed, enveloped by another in a mantle of recollection. A gentle force holds it in recollection ... The Master himself creates a disposition of silent attention and peaceful submission'(I want to see God, page 8-9).

We can long for contemplative prayer and we can prepare for it by practising being silent as well as through the practice of humility and detachment, but there is nothing we can do to bring it about. Teresa uses a helpful image. In pre-contemplative prayer we have been like someone drawing water from a well. The well has been provided by God and with God's help we have been carrying the water to the garden of our soul and watering it. With the gift of contemplation we experience an unexpected welling up of water from a spring deep inside the garden itself. If we are willing to remain open to these graced moments when God draws us to himself beyond all our thoughts and feelings, and if we resist the temptation to take control of them or to possess them or to attempt to reproduce them by our own efforts or techniques, God's longing to be in communion with us is such that transient experiences of recollection tend to deepen so that the soul finds itself wrapped in quiet prayer. Unlike the quiet prayer that we ourselves were able to induce, this quiet is one which we can only receive and welcome as a gift.

In our thirteenth reflection we looked at the difficulties which are experienced when we first enter into contemplation, especially the difficulty in having to learn to deal differently with distractions. We are tempted to try to control them. However, when God gives us the gift of contemplation, he is weaning us off our need to be in control. He is drawing us beyond ourselves into the mysterious communion where we allow God to take us where he wills, trusting that it is into the centre of his divine embrace. We experience losing control over not only our prayer but also our imagination, memory and thoughts and, while we are contemplating we have to learn not to leave the communion which we are experiencing in the depths of our soul to attend to the distractions that are happening on the surface. We looked at certain experiences that point to the presence of contemplation and we examined what John of the Cross calls 'the night of the senses'.

In our fourteenth reflection, we noted that in contemplative prayer it is faith alone which guides us, for we have been taken beyond the reach of reason.

Contemplative prayer is Jesus' own prayer experienced in our hearts through the gift of Jesus' Spirit. In our fifteenth reflection we looked at the traditional 'seven gifts': ways in which grace disposes our soul to be in communion with God. We looked also at the traditional fruits that can be seen in those who have handed their lives over to the Spirit of Jesus. We saw how people live who are drawn into contemplative prayer.

In our sixteenth reflection we listened as Teresa of Avila shared with us her experiences of deeper contemplative communion. Sometimes while experiencing the Prayer of Quiet, she experienced brief moments of a deeper communion in which all her faculties were absorbed in prayer. She calls this the Prayer of Union. In 1556, when she was forty-one, she experienced what she calls spiritual betrothal: a commitment given to her by Jesus of an unbreakable love and a corresponding commitment which she was inspired to give to him. It is called a betrothal for it involved a promise that one day she would enjoy the full communion with him (the 'marriage') for which she longed. During the sixteen years of her 'betrothal', Teresa was busy doing God's will, founding convents of the reformed Carmelite rule throughout Spain. She also experienced words that came to her from Jesus in her prayer, as well as ecstasies and visions. We looked at these extraordinary mystical experiences and listened as she and John of the Cross warned us not to be curious about such matters or to give them undue significance. It is the prayer-communion that is important, not these accompanying phenomena. If they are from God they have already achieved God's purpose in the very experience itself. We are not to focus on them, for to do so would be to take our eyes off the one who loves us.

During this period of spiritual betrothal, Teresa experienced the final purification of all that might prevent her from enjoying full communion in God's love. She experienced the inflowing of God and with it a deep peace and a profound joy. But for the most part God who had touched her

soul in such an intimate way seemed to withdraw and to be absent. We saw that this is in order to stretch the soul by desire, making it capable of more love. It also purifies of all attachments. It is a painful experience. It is though the recipient of this grace is being plunged in darkness in the very centre of the soul: we long to see the one who has drawn us into love, but we cannot. No longer is it the senses and the faculties that depend upon them that are being purified; now it is the core of the ego. God is calling us to himself and therefore we are being drawn into a prayer which relies solely on faith. The light with which God illumines the soul cannot be registered by any of our faculties; they are all plunged into darkness. We are journeying in the darkness of faith. Divine warmth and fragrance are not registered in the normal way, for the flowing in of love coming from God draws us beyond ourselves into communion with him in the inmost dwelling places of the soul. The attraction and the union occur in a darkness which John of the Cross speaks of as the 'night of the spirit'. We examined this experience in the seventeenth reflection.

The suffering experienced in this 'night of the spirit' makes the soul more tender, more compassionate and more open to love. We learn to identify with Jesus' cry from the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?' To cope with this darkness we must first of all remember that the pain is brought about by the flame of love coming from the brazier of the heart of God. Nothing now stands between us and the one we love. The journey, though at times painful, is a journey into the arms of one who has promised himself to us. Whatever sufferings we have, Teresa reminds us that 'the soul knows they are great favours.' 'The soul feels that the pain is precious.' We are learning to place all our trust in God and to keep our eyes on Jesus.

In 1572, when she was 57 years old, Teresa experienced the fullness of communion with God. Her whole soul, now completely purified, was one with God in the fire of divine love. Nothing hindered her from enjoying the communion in love for which we are all created. The transformation of her soul in love was complete. In the last ten years of her life she experienced the beginning of a communion in love which is the essence of the Beatific Vision. Her perfect communion in love made it possible for her to be a perfect instrument in carrying out God's will.

We are made in the image of God. God offers each of us a grace similar to that enjoyed by those whose guidance we have been seeking. Trusting in Jesus' invitation, may we draw near to his heart and come to know the communion in love which is his life, so that we might be able to say with Saint Paul: 'For me to live is Christ'(Philippians 1:21).