

Summary

In this paper I have tried to delineate a picture of the Rescue Societies as organizations. I have argued that in order to understand them we need to think in terms of two ideal types of organization, a religious organization and a social work organization. No single Society, no one Administrator embodies fully and without qualification either model, but Societies and Administrators all tend more towards one rather than the other, and the future of the Societies will depend on which model becomes dominant. It is, of course, possible to elaborate and refine the two models I have outlined. Religious organizations, for example, can have a number of different goals: the maintenance and development of religious practice; the inculcation of moral principles; the attainment of the intellectual understanding of religious beliefs and the development of commitment to Christianity. These cannot always be achieved together. But the distinction even in its very simple form between a social work organization and a religious organization does generate some significant questions and, above all, helps to lower the tone of discussion from its usual useless heights of monotonous abstraction.

Group Prayer and Contemplation by Simon Tugwell, O.P.

For most Catholics, a prayer meeting is a new and perhaps disturbing experience. However, in recent years an increasing number of Catholics have been meeting to pray together, in silence or in spoken prayer as they feel led by the Spirit; so it may be useful, for both enthusiasts and critics, to consider in general terms the advantages, objectives and principles of prayer meetings, and to face frankly the dangers and possible errors to which they are liable.

The basic principle of group prayer is the teaching of our Lord, that 'where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in their midst' (Matt. 18, 20), and that 'if two of you agree about anything on earth in prayer, it shall be granted' (18, 19). For we are together the Body of Christ, and as such 'members of one another' (Eph. 4, 25). As Christians, we belong together; it is therefore natural and proper that we should exercise our most specifically Christian privilege of prayer together. This is what much of the recent liturgical renewal has been about.

Group prayer obviously falls into two kinds: formal, liturgical prayer, and spontaneous, free prayer. Originally, of course, these

two were not separate. Even the Eucharistic Prayer, the Canon of the Mass, was originally extemporized by the celebrant. And it is clear that in the worship of the early Church the whole assembly would take part in various ways (except perhaps the women—and there St Paul may have been dealing with the particular situation!). Whether we shall ever return to this, or even whether it would be a good thing to return to this, I do not know. In any case, our situation is different, and we do have to distinguish between set prayer and spontaneous prayer.

There should be no need here to explain the importance of liturgical group prayer, where the Church acts in her official capacity, praying with all her divinely given authority in the name of Jesus her Head. Here, in the words of the Church, we do indeed know that the Spirit himself intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (Rom. 8, 26f).

But it is of the nature of the case that such formal prayer should be general; it cannot and should not provide for the particular and specific needs of any given time and place. The attempt to make liturgy always topical is fundamentally misconceived. It is of the essence of the liturgy that it should be 'routine' prayer. And psychologically this is extremely important; this is our prayer-world, the framework within which we can learn to live the life of Christian joy and freedom. Our prayer does not originate with us, it is a cosmic process, it is a divine process, initiated by God himself; we are invited to take part in it, but it is not 'our' prayer primordially. We relax, we settle down into an ongoing process of prayer, we let it subtly and gently mould and sustain us. We do not—or should not—expect it always to be a great 'experience', any more than we expect our morning cornflakes to be a great 'experience'. But if we are deprived of it, we notice it. Quite apart from the more strictly theological importance of liturgical prayer, it is psychologically necessary for us to have a kind of prayer we simply 'slip into', which in a certain sense requires very little deliberate effort; which we attend to as best we can, but which does not depend on our attention. We can participate quite properly even when we feel quite exhausted and unable to concentrate. Those who complain that the new liturgy does not meet this need have a perfectly valid complaint, even if their accusation is misdirected.

In addition to this kind of prayer, though, the Church has always recognized the importance of 'private' prayer, and, in general, has always recognized that even when a person prays alone, his prayer is never in the strictest sense 'private'. It is always the Church at prayer; one cannot pray at all except in the fellowship of believers, not to mention the angels and saints. This prayer is our personal dialogue with the Father, through Jesus Christ and in his Holy Spirit; just as the glory of each saint in heaven is different from every other, so even here the divine calling of each one of us is

peculiarly his own. And this not just in general, but in each particular moment of his life. This is why it is not enough to follow the general rules, the moral principles; life is not lived in the abstract, but in the particular. The rules, the laws, the principles, are the road signs, the white lines down the middle of the road, the traffic lights and No Entry signs; they define an area within which we can drive. But the driving requires far more than just that! It requires a particular and specific response to each particular situation. Similarly our lives in Christ require each moment a particular, specific response to the will of God in Christ. According to St Thomas Aquinas, the new law, the law of the Spirit of life, is not a set of external rules and regulations, not a new spiritual Highway Code, but the actual indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The traditional teaching of the Church is that, in addition to the virtues (our obedience to the general principles of moral behaviour), we need the gifts of the Spirit, by which we are docile to the particular leading of God in specific situations. And this leading is not something impersonal; it is always, or can be, a personal encounter with God in Jesus Christ. This is part of the meaning of the injunction to 'pray always', 'without intermission' (Luke 18, 1; I Thess. 5, 17). Our prayer, at its most basic level, is our dialogue in faith and obedience to the particular way in which God is making himself present to us at the given moment. And here, too, as in every other aspect of our Christian lives, 'no man is an island'. It is very natural and proper that Christians should pray not just individually, but also in groups, in twos and threes with Christ in the midst, listening to the will of God, praying (as St Catherine says) the prayers that God himself puts into our hearts.

Christ came 'that our joy might be full' (John 15, 11); and our prayer will often be characterized by great joy. But we do not meet for prayer simply in order to enjoy ourselves; our meat is to do the will of him who sent us (John 4, 34). Our desire is to serve him in prayer, according to his will. And here it is an enormous blessing to be able to pray with others, who may perhaps be more attuned than we are to the will of God. Or, even if they are not, the mere fact of all being together, trying to subject ourselves in faith to him, makes it easier for us to concentrate ourselves on him. In a very real way, we can minister Christ to each other to an extent far beyond his actual presence (at least consciously) to us. Like the widow who, because of her obedience, found herself giving Elijah far more than she actually had, we too can minister Christ to others, by his grace, far in advance of our own union with him. Have we not all, at some time or another, found ourselves giving advice or something, far wiser than we ourselves knew? These are little signs that Christ is indeed at work through us, as well as in us.

The Church has always taught that we must distinguish between God's work *in* us, and his work *through* us. The former is what

sanctifies us, the latter is for the good of others primarily, though, if we are open, we ourselves receive a grace on the rebound, as it were. It has been the consistent teaching of the Church that even dramatic examples of God working *through* us are no indication of our own degree of sanctity. A prophecy can be given through Balaam's ass, if need be! Now, on the one hand, this is a warning against pride; the fact that the Lord can and does use us, does not necessarily even mean that we are in a state of grace. But on the other hand, it is an encouragement to our humility: we do not have to wait till we are saints before we can minister Christ, even in dramatic ways, to each other. In a group, then, we can all minister Christ to each other, to a degree far surpassing the individual sanctity of any one of us in the group. Thus we can build up the Church in the power of grace, we can pray and praise God in his own Spirit and power, and in so doing advance our own sanctification.

We may call this the 'charismatic' aspect of group prayer, in that 'charism' has come to be restricted, in common usage, to this area of graces given for others through us. And, in so far as we allow it to happen, our meetings may well be led by God into the various charismatic manifestations (prophecy, healing, tongues and interpretation, etc.), all of which have been experienced by our canonized saints, but whose scope is in principle much wider than that. The saint is, as the Vatican Council reminded us, simply the fully-fledged 'normal' Christian; and we become saints only by allowing the grace of God free play. This always means that in one sense we will be 'playing at' being that bit holier than we are; for God, according to St Cyril of Jerusalem, the fourth-century Doctor of the Church, is he who 'makes the play-actor into a true believer'. In the Mass, *par excellence*, we 'pretend' to be perfect, and in so pretending, become that bit more perfect; in acting as if we really *were* the Church without spot or wrinkle, we gradually actually become like that. In the sacraments this happens, so to speak, at the objective level, and we may feel little or nothing of what is going on (how many of us actually experienced our baptism as a total spiritual death and rebirth?); in a prayer meeting of a more spontaneous kind, the same thing can happen at the subjective level.

This obviously raises the question of the relationship between the traditional teaching about the dawning of contemplation, and what I am suggesting about prayer meetings. It has traditionally been said that the contemplative is the person who *experiences* the truths of the faith (see, for instance, the useful though slightly hidebound pamphlet by de la Taille, *Contemplative Prayer*¹); the awakening of contemplation is experienced *passively*, as pure reception of a gift from God (though, as de la Taille points out, the contemplative is only beginning to *feel* what is actually true of any Christian—it is not strictly a new *gift*, but a new experience of receiving the gift, that

¹Burns Oates. 1926.

takes place when contemplation begins). In scholastic terms, it is the conscious coming into play of the gifts of the Spirit, bestowed in principle at baptism, but only now beginning to exercise their proper rôle in actual life and experience.

The Carmelite school has rather led us to feel that this coming of contemplation is something which simply 'happens' to us. We should no more pray for it to come than the child should pray to wake up six inches taller! (Though wouldn't it be a funny child who did not aspire to grow?)

However, the older teaching, including that of St Thomas, is not quite so passive. The origin of all Christian teaching about contemplation as such is monastic; the monks, in face of a world becoming superficially Christian, developed practices designed to help them preserve the fullness of the Christian faith and hope. They fairly consciously, at their best, avoided passing judgment on those who remained 'in the world'. For their own purposes, they taught that until their 'Renunciation', or 'Conversion' in St Benedict's sense, they had lived as if still subject to the law of sin and death, under the Law like the old Israel; at their 'Conversion' they were delivered from the Law, and entered the freedom of the new law, the law of the Spirit, they were freed from servile fear and came under the domain of love. This, clearly, developed into the regular teaching about the ages of the spiritual life, beginning with servile fear, from which one is freed by love which casts out fear (which St Catherine explicitly connects with the experience of Pentecost, which transformed the apostles from men afraid into men aglow with love, and boldness, and freedom of speech before men and God).

It is, on this view, in quite a real sense, up to us to decide to stay at the level of Law and fear, or to move on to the level of love and freedom. Up to us, because to move on is quite simply to claim the promise made to all Christians. The monks never thought they were doing more than simply being Christians; what they experienced was quite simply the operation of baptismal grace. It is simply to enter into the inheritance of all Christians; but to do so by making some decisive move, a move *away* from 'the world', and all its cares and concerns, its worries and its desires, its ambitions and its responsibilities (thus making visible and effective in living experience the baptismal renunciation of the pomps of Satan), and a decisive move *towards* a kind of life which professed, and, at least to some extent embodied, total dependence on and adherence to Christ. This could and did take extremely diverse forms; but in every case there was a real step to be taken, a bridge to be crossed, a boat to be burned. One did not become perfect overnight; but one did enter a 'state' of perfection.

Now, theologically, it is essential never to lose sight of the total dependence of the contemplative life on the sacramental life. Baptism is its beginning, communion its daily bread. But psychologically,

we can see that to take some decisive step of the kind we have been considering can place us in the way of *experiencing* the grace received implicitly in the sacraments. And a step, taken to some extent publicly, is all the more potent. This is why, long before religious orders were invented and given canonical status, one did not become a monk privately. There was always some kind of group, with which one professed to involve himself. Although this is theologically unimportant, psychologically it is extremely important to associate oneself with a group which is already committed to the 'contemplative' life—and, after all, the contemplative life, whatever else it may be, has to do with *experience*, direct personal experience of our faith, and that is, among other things, a psychological matter.

It is, it seems, helpful that there should be some kind of step which can be taken to make manifest one's determination to let Christ have more of one's life; indeed, to have all of it. And, in one way or another, this must be, so to speak, ratified by God himself. There is our move; and there is God's move, or at least an experience which feels like God making a new move. And these two may not coincide in time, in which case we must wait, watch, and pray—like the unfortunate converts in Samaria, who were baptized and (like most of us) showed no signs of having received the Spirit. Some further step had to be taken, to ensure for them their birthright of a genuine experience of initiation in the Holy Spirit.

So, in prayer groups, it is commonly the case that, at some stage, people come to a critical point, a 'point of no return'. This may just happen, suddenly and unsolicited; the grace of God sometimes goes straight to work on us, entirely ignoring the censor in our heads. But, perhaps more frequently, he waits to be asked, stirring our minds and our hearts to *seek* the breakthrough, the experience of grace. In such cases, it is often helpful for the group to pray for a person, that he may receive some clear token of God's real presence in him, some unmistakable 'introduction' to the Holy Spirit, which will at least begin to drive out fear, a touch of God's finger which he can never quite go back on, and which will, if he goes with it, lead him into ever more subtle recognition of God's promptings, setting him on the way (no more, obviously!) of love and freedom and boldness before God and men. The gesture of laying on of hands is a traditional and convenient one to use on such occasions. And people sometimes experience the gift of tongues, as a sort of gesture in return from the Lord. It is a simple, and harmless (at the very least) way in which we can reach out beyond or above ourselves (as St Catherine keeps saying we are to do), ministering Christ, as I have said, in a way surpassing our own personal achievement of sanctity, but in this case ministering him as much to ourselves as to anyone else.

This experience of breakthrough is what the Pentecostals call 'baptism in the Spirit', a term which has recently found its way also into Protestant and even Catholic circles, but which is, un-

fortunately, in my opinion, unacceptable in the last analysis, being exegetically unsound, theologically confusing, and very risky pastorally. I shall return to this in a later article. The Eastern Christians prefer to talk of 'the discovery of the working of the Spirit', 'the feel of God', or 'the manifestation of baptism'.

Correction

We regret that in our review of *A Variety of Catholic Modernists* by Alec Vidler in the January issue the name of the publisher was incorrectly stated. The book is in fact published by the Cambridge University Press.

The Correspondence of Lord Acton and Richard Simpson

Volume I

Edited by JOSEF L. ALTHOLZ

and DAMIAN McELRATH

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