

# The New Theology and the Life of Prayer by John Dalrymple

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What effect have the new theological insights on our understanding of the life of prayer? It is a question of impact on the spirit of man. Theology deals with God, but it concerns man, and therefore, if a theology is to have any impact on the age it lives in, it must answer the questions which men of that age ask. Otherwise, however wide its research and valid its conclusions, it will remain outside the current of life. The best way, therefore, to examine the spirituality of the new theology is to begin by examining the needs of modern man. From our understanding of the latter will grow our appreciation of the former.

Man's understanding of himself has developed in the modern age. A hundred years ago, if you said 'person' you conjured up the image of *separateness*. Words like 'sovereignty' and 'inalienable' rose to the lips. Man was thought of primarily as an individual with rights of his own, an island in a sea of other islands. But now we understand things differently. Without denying the inalienability and essential separateness of a person, we think it equally necessary to stress that he is only a person because he can enter into relations with other persons; that, as well as existing in himself, he also exists for other people; that 'the most vital core of man does not consist in the solitary and hardened affirmation of his individual autonomy, but in availability, welcome, receptivity'. (Charles Moeller). In fact that man is *not* an island, but part of the main.

Now if the meaning of a person is to be found in availability and welcome to other persons, we should give some thought to the process by which men enter into relations with other men. It is not an automatic process. Just to be physically in the company of other human beings means nothing. We do it, for instance, in public transport every day, going to work. Other people may be highly complicated personalities with rich histories of their own, but to us as they bump into us and step on our toes in the underground, they are no more than objects who occupy the space next door to us. We do not treat them as persons at all, but prefer to stand silently beside them waiting for the end of the journey, which brings us release, and communication with the real persons in our lives at home. On the other hand, if we trouble to speak to our neighbours in the train, the relationship becomes quite different. We begin very tentatively, to know them. We thus begin to regard them not only as objects occupying space beside us, but as subjects, people to

speak to and share the journey with. We have begun to enter into personal dialogue with them. A real relationship has sprung up between us. When this happens, it does not happen automatically, but by mutual consent. We enter into personal dialogue with people because we want to. An act of the will begins it.

Pursue this process of dialogue further through the stages of acquaintance to companionship to friendship and finally to love, and it proves a rewarding study. There is an important period when surface acquaintance gives way to friendship and both partners suddenly begin to enter into each other's lives; the friendship becomes an interior one. To use the modern phrase, they begin to communicate. So, too, the last stage of love, if reached, is important, when all the barriers have gone and mutual availability is complete. The point, surely, to notice is that this is a voluntary process. At any given moment, a man can call a halt and, as it were, step off the escalator. We do this all the time. We do not admit many to the intimacies of deep friendship, let alone love. Some people even find it difficult (or are unwilling) to make that initial step which turns the other from an 'it' into a 'thou'. Everyone, however, will agree that the more complete person is precisely he who has the deeper relationships with others, who has entered into friendship with those with whom he lives. 'The more really special a thing is, the more abundance of being it has in itself, the more intimate unity and mutual participation there will be between it and what is other than itself,' says Karl Rahner.

A further question needs answering. What is it that holds us back from entering into real relationships? What makes us erect barriers of privacy round our personalities and a whole array of 'no entry' notices in our conversations? It is surely fear. At the root of all of us, our inheritance from Adam, is a fear of taking root in the not-I, of being not only used by other people but even known by them. It is a fear lest the independence of our person be destroyed. Rather than risk that we unconsciously choose loneliness and unhappiness. Men stay lonely rather than be involved in another's knowledge and another's life. We stick out for independence. And as a result our personalities do not grow because we have not formed real relationships with other people. Think of the marriages that break up because neither spouse has surrendered his availability or been willing to be known and loved at the deep level where two 'thou's' meet. Such spouses we rightly classify as too immature for marriage. They have not conquered fear. The modern hero James Bond is a case in point. Too immature ever to be dependent, he remains a curiously jejune personality. For all his physical feats, he lacks the courage to enter into dialogue with his acquaintances. It is too dangerous for him. 'I think I have always liked my fellow men. Liking is a great deal safer than love. It demands no victims,' says Dr Colin in Graham Greene's *A Burnt Out Case*.

The tragedy is that modern city life produces an increasing number of people who shy away from the idea of being such victims. In the villages of a former age and the slum tenements of the last generation privacy was impossible. Not surprisingly those milieux produced rich personalities. But the housing schemes and garden suburbia of the 1950's and 60's are built for privacy and fear. Behind the bright curtains and the multi-coloured doors of the housing estates are many stunted persons, depriving themselves of the richest of human experiences. This, then is the characteristic problem of our age: the problem of mutual love and trust, of communication between individuals, who are thrown together as never before in our cities, but remain isolated within themselves. Theology must answer that deep need in modern man or be found wanting by this generation.

We turn now to consider what for want of a better word is called the new theology. Clearly we cannot do justice to it in a few paragraphs. Nevertheless let us try to look at it at least in its outlines. Would it not be true to say the dominant note of modern theology is the idea of dialogue? Père Daniélou has written, 'Without doubt the master key to Christian theology, which distinguishes it utterly from all rational theodicy, is contained in the statement that the Trinity of Persons constitutes the structure of Being, and that love is therefore as primary as existence'. We see an insistence right away on the Trinity, on the realization that the heart of God is a triangle of relationships, that the meaning of the three Persons of God consists in existence for others, not existence in themselves. In fact, that in the beginning was a dialogue, an eternal dialogue of love pre-existing creation. This is where all theology starts: at the God who is in himself dynamic not static.

From there it is easy to pass on to the idea of salvation. This God who loves, who *is* love, also saves. The older catechisms defined God in purely philosophical terms as the Being who alone existed of himself and was infinitely perfect, and seemed to encourage the pupil to think of God first of all statically before proceeding to his act of redemption. But now we approach God straight away in his act of salvation, without which we would not have encountered him at all. 'God is the Father of all men. He calls all men, regardless of their race, colour, or social condition, to unite themselves with him.' (From *Christ in Us*, by Kilgallon and Weber.) This may be a philosophically loose definition, but it introduces us at once to a saving God, a God who speaks to us, and calls us to him.

The notion of God speaking to men has been considerably developed in a modern theology, largely through a greater understanding of the Hebrew notion of word as event as well as speech. This has led to a well considered theology of the Word. What the Bible understood by God revealing himself and speaking to men has come more to light in

our days, and the result has been a remarkable growth in Christian theology of the idea of personal communication between God and men. A significant text is the opening sentence of the Epistle to the Hebrews: 'In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son . . .' It is clear that the author was not referring to sounds issuing from God's mouth or messages from heaven, but to the events of salvation history which, he insists, are words from God. The whole unfolding plan of God to save is presented under the idea of dialogue, God entering into relations with his creatures, speaking his Word to them, *communicating*. The words God speaks, the author seems to suggest, are no longer confined to the hidden councils of the Trinity, but are spoken to men as well. Redemption is the invitation to enter into this divine dialogue, to speak back to God even while still on this earth. We might say that redemption loosens our tongues to speak back to God in response to his Word to us. Loosening of tongues is the pentecostal phenomenon.

Side by side with the new scriptural insights goes the liturgical awakening. The dominant idea here, prevailing since Pius X and Dom Lambert Beauduin, is the idea of active participation. Much more than the vernacular (which is only one manifestation of it) it is the main theme of our current liturgical changes. It runs strongly through the Vatican Council's Constitution on the Liturgy as the aim of all the reforms voted for by the bishops. 'Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy' is the way in which the subject is broached in article 14, after the theological prolegomena. But, when you come to consider it, the idea of active participation is akin to, if not the same as, the idea of mutual dialogue. The people of God, assembled for worship, are now encouraged to avert to one another, to join with one another, to sing together and act together the eucharistic rite which binds them to the Father. This in turn is their response to having listened side by side to the Word of God proclaimed from the sanctuary. They have sat and heard together (not read separately from missals) the readings and the homily. Now they respond with joint actions and words.

In other words the well-ordered worshipping community is one which communicates with itself as well as communicating with the Father. Always there has been, thank God, this communication with God. Now we are being encouraged to communicate together as well. The dialogue must become horizontal as well as vertical. Barriers of reserve between parishioners must come down if the liturgy is to be performed as the Constitution desires it. Those fears of suburbia and the housing estates have to be overcome before the liturgy comes alive in the parish. But – and this is the whole point of the *aggiornamento* – those barriers do

come down before the liturgy, because by its very nature it breaks down walls. For it is presided over by the Risen Christ. 'He is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility', and has 'reconciled us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end'. (Eph. 2. 14-16). The horizontal dialogue, modern man's deepest need as we saw above, is assured success precisely by the vertical dialogue. Christ binds us to the common Father, and so inevitably we find ourselves bound to each other, communicating with one another in the Family.

The particular strength, then, of the modern insights in theology is this existential stress upon the personal approach. The Godhead itself is seen as a dramatic dialogue between Father and Son issuing in the Holy Ghost. God's saving action in the world is the outcome of this conversation pursued outside the confines of the Trinity. While on earth the Body of Christ responds with its own divinely given communication, which is the liturgy. No wonder that the notable mark of the Church in this decade is this sudden urge to speak to all men, to 'enter into dialogue with the modern world', to use the very phrase of the present Holy Father. This is the whole *raison d'être* of the present Council, whose typical figure is Pope John opening his arms to the world, and whose latest symbol has been Pope Paul, journeying to India and there joining hands with non-Christian leaders under the protection of the one Father.

This broadening of the perspectives in theology has resulted in the remarkable thaw in the Church which we know as the *aggiornamento*. The Church has begun to communicate with modern men, even with her ancient sworn antagonists. But the real significance of the new theology, its real test, comes surely at the personal level, where Christian meets Christian and non-Christian. If the *aggiornamento* does not result in a change of heart among individuals, then for all its remarkable ecclesiastical effect, it will have failed to speak to modern man. Men are individuals not abstractions, and they cannot be affected deeply except as individuals. This means that they cannot be affected deeply except *by* individuals. If modern man is to respond to the call of God today, it will be a personal response evoked by a personal call. My neighbour will respond to me as a bearer of Christ to him, not to a generalized call from the Church. The acid test of theology today is precisely whether it answers the question which most needs answering for man today, the question of who can release him from his fear and cause him to communicate freely.

We Christians know that the only person who can release a man from the bondage of selfhood and draw him out of himself is Christ. The question is whether we today offer Christ to the world as a liberating person, or as an agent of restriction. If we are to show forth Christ as a liberating agent then we must first have entered into that liberation

ourselves; we must first have conquered our primal fears; we must first have prayed.

This is the level at which modern theology has its greatest significance spiritually. Its insights draw us powerfully to prayer. For the only adequate response to the divine approach to the Word, this speaking to us by God which we call the Redemption, is to speak back. We speak back to God by praying. The developments in theology outlined above point the way to personal contemplation in a way that the earlier more scholastic theology did not really do. The older, more impersonal theology (which for instance tended to conceive of grace too much as a created entity in our souls and not enough as the presence of the Uncreated Reality who is God) gave rise to methodic meditation. Too often personal prayer stopped short at this very initial stage, and was not encouraged to go further. If it did, a tremendous 'fuss' was made, signs were called for, much discrimination and discernment of spirits was required, and in general the atmosphere of exception was created. Men were on the whole discouraged from seeking further intimacy with God than that of meditative consideration of points. Actual person to person encounter in a living dialogue was not the rule. Men thought about God rather than 'thought God'.

Today, however, we have this more personalist theology and modern people find themselves passing quite easily into free converse with God in prayer. It is not the modern mentality to be too cut and dried in personal relations, and this is reflected in prayer. St John of the Cross' three classic signs for advancing beyond meditation may be present implicitly in one who prays simply, but they are seldom explicit. The result is a free and easy approach to prayer – not easy in the sense of lacking in challenge and asceticism, but easy in the sense of relaxed and personal.

There is, in fact, a close parallel between the process by which a man makes friends with God in prayer and the process by which he makes friends in daily life. In the latter we saw that it was a question of wanting to speak to a person which initiated a friendship. So, too, it is with God and prayer. A man must desire to pray at the outset if he is to have a life of prayer at all. At the very beginning of the relationship he must want to know God, not just know about him. Again we noticed that the vital period in human intercourse is when a man breaks through his natural barrier of reserve and passes from surface acquaintance to interior friendship. This is the vital period in prayer, too, when a man gives up following set patterns and begins to remain speechless and absorbed before the Godhead. This is the time when he passes to an I-Thou relationship with God, the period when simple contemplation begins. It is, I think, more common than we are led to believe among practising Christians. Should we not expect it to be as common as

human friendship in the world? Lastly, some human friendships become love. About this little can be said except that it is a state of total mutual absorption between two people, which is really beyond words to describe. Here, too, the parallel with prayer is real. Those who have been drawn completely out of themselves to be absorbed in God tell us that words are quite useless to describe this state; a kind of fusion of lives has taken place. 'What do you say to Our Lord?' Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity was asked by her sisters in religion. 'We love each other', was the reply.

It is, of course, true that this drawing of man to God in prayer has taken place at all ages of the Church's history. The Spirit blows where and when he wants to. Nevertheless, theology today is uniquely equipped to encourage such a growth, precisely because its dominant idea is that of the dialogue between man and God. Grace, redemption, liturgy are presented as personal encounters with Christ. What more natural than that man should wish to respond with personal commitment? If the characteristic malaise of our age is anxious fear, then modern theology provides the remedy: the possibility of entering into a lasting dialogue with the Son of God.

*I have a sinne of feare : that when I have spunne  
My last thred, I shall perish on the shore ;  
Swear by thy selfe, that at my death thy sonne  
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore ;  
And, having done that, Thou haste done,  
I feare no more.*

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