

SILENCE AND PRAYER

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THROUGHOUT the Church at the present time there is a growing movement of return to a closer love and more popular understanding and sharing in the prayer of the Liturgy. To a system which sees an earthly paradise in terms of the community, the Christian faith contrasts the fundamental truth of divine revelation that the relationship between man and God is one between a community of persons. But within that shared life of Christians there often exists a longing for greater simplicity and directness in the approach of the individual to God. For a baptised Christian does not primarily join an earthly society or adopt an ideology, he enters into a relationship with God, with three divine persons. God gives himself, adopts the Christian, who must then discover how to receive his adoption, how to get out of his own way, how to 'die in order to live'.

Liturgical worship which includes sacrifice, adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, supplication and instruction is one powerful means of nourishing and educating the Christian in his life as adopted son of God. During public liturgical worship he is, above all, sharing in the life of the Christian family, publicly taking his place in the Mystical Body of Christ incarnate in his Church, publicly offering himself with the sacrifice and receiving the divine food with which the heavenly Father feeds his adopted sons.

But every wise human father knows that each of his children needs at times his undivided attention. How precious in family life are times when father and son or father and daughter have each other to themselves.

In this we may see a reflection of the complete relationship as it must develop between God and each individual soul. We need to 'have God to ourselves'. Certainly we do this most completely at the times of the common spiritual meal, sacramental communion; but normally this act is very much conditioned as a matter of practical necessity by our

fellow Christians, our distance from a church and so forth. I want therefore to suggest that some greater space, some further spiritual provision for the development of the essential private, personal relationship between the individual soul and the divine persons, must be found, and that it can be found in the practice as a normal and regular thing for everyone of recollection and silent prayer.

By *silent* prayer, I do not mean non-vocal meditation or mental prayer, but a kind of prayer which is closely related to that 'prayer of quiet' usually popularly associated with a considerable degree of advancement in 'union with God'. In a previous article I tried to suggest that the 'gift of the Spirit to every Christian' is a truth too long neglected in contemporary practice and now I want to suggest that with the gift of the Spirit goes also the potential power to receive the gift of some degree of contemplative prayer. Furthermore, that this prayer will provide for every Christian, as it did for the greatest saints, wings to carry him towards God. Those who practise this prayer realise more fully their adoption as sons, they obey God's will through love instead of from duty, they answer 'I will because I want to, not because I must'.

This prayer is desirable but it is hard because of the nature of man as he is. He must first 'die in order to live'. In this Christ is our example as in everything, but between him and ourselves lies the gulf of sin. The spirit of man, called to intimacy with a spiritual God, is inseparably part of a physical outer life. The whole problem of the way to union is how to give the primacy to the spirit—through divine grace to direct the whole man, body and soul, towards God who is a spirit. The Church as the mystical incarnation of God the Son shows forth in her sacraments, physically, the invisible life of God. But these outward and physical signs of prayer are insidiously easy to follow without the corresponding inward recollection and stillness.

In Christ alone the outward life, every minute of every day, every breath he breathed, every word and gesture were perfectly directed in its wholeness towards his Father through the Holy Spirit. In him each moment of time during his earthly life was already redeemed and united to its source.

There was no conflict of his will between 'outer and inner'. His human nature was entirely grace, totally united to the divine life of the other persons of the holy Trinity.

Within the Church are to be found all the necessary means to enable us to reach the condition of 'co-heirs with Christ', but because of our state of 'tendency towards sin' we lose our direction; that perfect union of body and soul which gives complete primacy and dominion to the spirit is beyond us. It is a state of divine order or perfect justice, and the human state is one of conflict, disorder and injustice. This is plainly demonstrated by the circumstances of Christ's birth, life, passion and death. No greater example of human injustice can be imagined. Thus at its simplest the aim of a Christian life can be regarded as a desire to achieve, through union with Christ, divine order or justice within each individual and in his relationship with others.

But in man's 'fallen' state this simple ideal quickly disintegrates into a picture of contrasts as between matter and spirit, mind and body, heart and head, tangible and intangible, etc. And in so far as we see not only life but the practice of religion in these terms, just so far are we separated from that oneness through Christ with God at which we are ostensibly aiming.

The form that prayer takes determines the direction in which each individual develops towards union with God. We are conventional acquaintances of God, people whom he will consent 'to know', but the door to his private room stands open in vain and we do not press on towards friendship and love, towards an intimate knowledge of his ways and affections.

Christ as man is our example in his prayer. Never for a moment was he separated from the Holy Trinity, but he frequently went 'apart, himself alone to pray'. He had no need to do this unless it was to show by his actions what we should do when we wish to pray, and also to show visibly his permanent invisible state. As God he was always 'himself alone', the 'One who is'. As man he walked, talked, ate and slept with the disciples and as man he left them to pray in silence and solitude.

Within the Church there has always been a tradition of

'contemplative' prayer carried on in silence and solitude. In its most easily understood form it consists in the 'Practice of the Presence of God': 'the exercise of remembering God so that the love of him may be born and formed in the soul so that the love of him may be born and formed in the soul to stir it to carry out his commands. This consciousness or mindfulness of God was the purpose of solitude and silence, of manual work, prayer and *lectio divina*—of the whole apparatus of the eremitical and monastic lives'. Also in the classical Catholic tradition of mysticism is the principle of 'abandonment', but 'there is a difference (and it is the difference of contemplation) between people of ordinary (I would say beginners') piety whose love rests on motives (discursively) proposed by faith and those who give themselves to complete renunciation. To the latter, God gives a persisting love of attraction which produces continual union or else a thirst for God, a need of constantly uniting themselves in heart to him. Such a one aspires to remain in union with God; love thus begets contemplation.' [Quoted from the *Downside Review*, Spring 1953, by the Abbot of Downside.]

In considering this passage I am not drawing particular attention to various categories which are suggested, for example 'mystical tradition' or 'eremitical life', but to the principle that it is a form of ordinary or beginners' piety to pray and love with the intellect and in dependence upon motives consciously proposed by faith. This kind of love does not always express the attitude of a child towards its father. The presence of certain motives in prayer may be the negation of that silence in the soul necessary for it to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit. The practice of abandonment by *inward* silence and solitude, quiet waiting in the remembered presence of an infinitely other and wholly spiritual God opens the way to 'contemplation'. It is this kind of contemplation which may be developed inwardly by most Christians. To say this is apparently to sweep away yet another division, that between 'mystic' and 'non-mystic', or that between 'contemplatives' or 'religious' and *ordinary* Christians. But the difference is one of degree, not of kind. If every living soul is created in the image of God and capable of reaching eternal union with him in heaven, cannot every baptised and adopted Christian claim also some share

in this intimate life of love described above as 'contemplation'? How can any Christian be intended to rest in 'beginners' piety'?

It seems clear that all are called to some degree of inward abandonment, to the practice of total inward silence, to wait upon the Holy Spirit, 'the soul's delightful guest', in quietness.

There is a sense in which even a few minutes of this truly silent prayer corresponds to that death which is necessary to life. For this inward silence and quiet is a temporary death not only to the senses but to the mind in so far as it is to be found in the purity of faith; the Christian's whole attention is turned inward towards the spiritual reality of the indwelling Holy Spirit known only by faith—he directs his affections to love and longing for this silent, unknown, divine person.

The older a human person is, the more confirmed in the necessary compromise with the flesh which comes with adult human life, the harder the beginning of the practice of this kind of prayer will be. But our Lord told us to become as little children. Perhaps the secret in the life of prayer is to remain as little children.

It has been noted above that the struggle to reach God involves, in its simplest terms, the struggle to give the primacy to spiritual realities. But in children to a much greater extent than in adults (so-called) this condition is naturally present. The child begins by seeing the world in the true way. The 'unhappened fact' seen through a mingling of imagination and faith very often has a more pressing reality than what we call truth. The bundle of rags *is* the most beautiful and lovable doll in the universe, the empty cocoa-tin *is* the big drum. Many children stay so long in this dream world of imagination and faith that they are accused of not knowing the difference between truth and falsehood.

Perhaps it may be true that the foundations of silent inward prayer, to a silent and invisible spirit-person, may be laid in early childhood, when the invisible is as real as the visible. The loving trust of the young child towards its human father can be directed towards its invisible heavenly Father, the seed of true 'abandonment' can be sown.

Even a very young child can be taught the difference between, for example, fairy tales and miracles. Provided faith, trust and love are fostered, with the startlingly vivid help of the child's imagination, his growing reason can be relied on to sort out theology from myth: for the two are closely related.

We erect so many barriers of systems, of regulations and categories between ourselves and the Father. If we could spend only ten minutes a day in the effort to love him entirely but passively with every faculty we have, in the effort which will involve 'death' to all the noises of sense and intellect, death to everything which is not God—his love would flood our being; the action of the Holy Spirit would silently and invisibly transform us from ourselves to Christ. We should no longer become arrested in beginners' piety, but receive a measure of contemplation.

In suggesting that every baptised Christian is called to progress in union with God in this life, and that silent inward prayer bringing contemplation is the most direct way, I do not mean to imply that there are not different types of human nature. The two essentials seem to be: inward *quiet prayer* combining love and attention which depends upon *silence*—a true inward silence which follows the deliberate effort towards withdrawal from the external things of sense, what is called recollection. To some it will be necessary, anyway at first, to think of the Holy Spirit, to talk mentally to him as to a person. But whatever the temperament of the individual may be, the essential is to turn inward, not upon self, but upon the Holy Spirit. (To avoid misunderstanding, I should say that I am not suggesting this instead of meditation on the sacred humanity of our Lord, which would be contrary to the teaching of all the great masters of prayer, for example St Teresa of Avila, but as a corollary.)

This kind of inward prayer can be practised whether or not the individual is a 'mystic' who is conscious of 'mystic experience'. It is a well-known fact that the religious Society of Friends practise only this kind of prayer. A glance at the journals and lives of some of the more outstanding members of this society shows how immensely fruitful in their spiritual lives and in practical good works this limited prayer has

proved to be. They seem to begin where some Catholics tend to leave off. Over and over again come the phrases 'to wait on God', 'to abandon myself to the Lord's will', to kneel down in distress and wait for his guidance and arise comforted and at peace.

St Bernard says that those who practise contemplative prayer must be filled like bowls and then overflow. The countless good works and famous charity of the Friends would seem to testify to this overflow from bowls filled full by the practice of contemplative prayer. All this seems to point to the conclusion that contemplation is not reserved for the giants of the spiritual life but is one of God's treasures of which he has said, 'ask and you shall receive'.

The present age is one of faith in techniques and love of motion. Possibly neither of these activities is essentially a human one. The animal has technical skills of great beauty. It is tempting to see in the modern love of speed the antithesis of the changeless 'I am' of God, the work of the devil dragging the spirit of man down into the cosmic dance of the electrons. To 'die daily' to physical activities of time and change in the world is to reach towards eternity. The kingdom of heaven is within us and it is there that we must not fail to look for it. There shall we find the entrance to the inner rooms of our Father's house, the intimate life which he calls us to share with him. Our part in the life of the Mystical Body, in the liturgy and the common life of the Christians, must support and be supported by this intimate union of love between the soul and God.

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