

R C I A

Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults

Prayer

For many lapsed Catholics prayer is the last practice to be lost; for many people who have no denominational allegiance, their only personal contact with religion.

For many people it is a mode they go into when they are at the end of their tether; and they therefore think of it as a somewhat shamefaced or even contemptible weakness. If they have no ordinary contact with God, no *time* for God for the most part, they feel disqualified from turning to God in their hour of need. This is an attempt at integrity, but it takes no account of the fact that integrity lies in being what you are; and we are first and last *creatures of God*. We can only find real integrity by acknowledging the fact; and if that only happens when our false self-sufficiency falls in ruins, so be it.

Prayer is something personal, and also something shared. It has to be an utterly honest coming to the Father; that means it has to embrace our whole self, our whole experience, in all its truth.

But we never come to God alone. We come to God *through Jesus Christ*. He said *No-one comes to the Father except through me*; and learning what this means for our prayer is a creative and vital stage in our growth in faith. We speak to God, or just rest in God, not only with Jesus at our side, but actually *in him*. St John tells us that we were made *in the Word*:

All things had their being through the Word:
apart from the Word nothing came to be

and the Letter to the Ephesians says

The Father chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world,
for us to be holy and unblemished before him in love

This means that our real life is only to be understood by finding our place in Christ, where we were originally chosen and made. So the effort to find our meaning at any time and place will be shortest and easiest if we turn our mind to Christ at the beginning, and so come to know the Father's will. Ephesians further says:

The Father is the one who revealed to us the mystery of his will,
according to his good pleasure which he proposed in Christ,
for the plan for the fulness of time,
recapitulating everything in Christ;
everything in heaven and everything on earth

Prayer is coming into God's presence - the Practice of the Presence of God. Being spiritual, God is not encountered by a physical journey or entrance, but by a spiritual

one, which can take place at any time, anywhere. When we reach out to him in our own spirit, he sends us his Holy Spirit to meet our spirit, and we find ourselves encountering God as the Other, the living God who is beyond our reach. In this encounter we are ourselves made holy, and become a dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit.

This cannot happen whilst we are clinging to our sins. No-one who is determined to cherish anger, or lust, or pride is able to pray, because these things divide the heart, and if only a small part of us is willing to encounter God it can't happen. He speaks to us when we come to him with complete surrender: the Jewish Creed says:

The Lord your God is One;
you must serve him with *all* your heart,
all your mind,
all your strength,
and *all* your will.

This is one reason why those whose alternatives are all finished can pray; their need has united them, so that they can come with complete surrender.

Those who have found ways in which they can pray have sometimes shared with us their experiences, and we hear a lot about the Russian Orthodox way of prayer, or the Ignatian way of prayer, or the Way of St Thérèse of Lisieux. These are very interesting, and can start our minds on the path of holiness by attraction; but they can't replace our personal coming to God, which has to spring from our own need, and our own self-giving. This sounds as if we're on our own; but that simply isn't true. Prayer isn't lonely at all:

You have one Master, and you are all brothers and sisters.
You have one Father, and he is in heaven.
You have only one Teacher, the Christ.

To learn how to pray is to become intimate with this communion of love which is the Holy Trinity. The best help to us is undoubtedly the Holy Scriptures; they give us access to the mind of God, whose Word they are; and particularly when we recite the Psalms, we know we are praying with Jesus, for whom the Psalter was his prayerbook. You could even say that the *only* true way to understand the Psalms is to read them with Jesus; that is why whenever we sing a psalm in the office, we add to it the doxology, praising the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We shouldn't forget, as we survey the great field of prayer, that the perfect prayer is not private and solitary at all: it is the Liturgy itself. People often feel that the Liturgy has become intrusive, noisy, full of activity and words. But that should warn us that the Liturgy is *not* a useful time for private prayer, as it appeared to be in the days before missals, and before the Vatican Council reform. Private prayer has its own time and place: Jesus told us *go into your private room, and shut your door, and pray to your Father who is in that secret place*. If we don't do this, we shall be starved of the consolation and attentiveness, the personal integrity which private prayer brings. The Liturgy is rather a time to act together, a time of working as a people, reading or listening together to the word that unites us, taking, blessing and breaking the bread, and sharing it in communion. There is no place there for a passive, pewbound

mentality that simply spectates. The liturgy in a particular parish will be sick insofar as it is filled with spectators. We must *all* live, and move, and listen, and sing, so that the Mass is what it says it is: Liturgy - the action of the whole people. It is perfect because it is always the act of Christ towards the Father, pouring out his life in our flesh. It gives our faith its true shape, it is indispensable for us if we are to grow straight. As the action of the whole body, it must give each of us our own rôle, so that we can celebrate our own share in the story of salvation.

But the Liturgy deserves a full treatment later on. Today we are considering the mystery of prayer; and there is one thing I would like to set before you, to console you and encourage you (as it does me). When we pray, we often feel that we are shouting into the dark, that we are confronting a great gulf. We may sense that there is nobody there, and instantly panic, paralysed by the idea that we have put God to the test and found him wanting, or put ourselves to the test and found ourselves wanting.

It is perfectly true that there is an infinite difference between God's life and mine, that human nature, like the Tower of Babel, is never destined to reach the heavens. But God is not indifferent, much less working against us. The distance between us and God can only be crossed by God, not by us. The truth is that it is already done. But that does not make us whole all at once. It is still necessary for us to learn the weakness of our power to seek and find God, to pray earnestly for the Holy Spirit to come. It is God who does it, though. We might say that when prayer happens, God is much more in charge than we are, and he does the real work.

So rather than making frantic collections of techniques and mantras, learning to control your breathing and putting your heels together at the back of your neck, it may be better to send out a sincere prayer for God to come, and then to fall silent and wait for him. He is already closer to us than we are to ourselves.