

become more complicated as the years go by and various minds analyse the facts and experience of what they are studying. It is perhaps time to produce simpler expositions of the life of prayer that will link up easily with the other aspects of the Christian life which are now playing such important parts in the Church—the Mystical Body, the Scriptures, the Liturgy. This issue of *THE LIFE* may perhaps serve as an introduction to such a simplification.



## THE ESSENTIALS OF PRAYER

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**I** SPENT this morning preparing some lectures on John Locke. He is, I think, a dull writer but I found a passage in his Introduction to the Essay which expresses very nearly my own feelings in reading this opening paper. 'Everyone', he says, 'must not hope to be a Boyle or a Sydenham, and in an age which produces such masters as the great Huygenius and the incomparable Mr Newton, with some other of that strain, 'tis ambition enough to be employed as an underlabourer in clearing the ground a little.' At this conference then which has brought together so many Boyles and Sydenhams of the spiritual life I shall try only to clear the ground a little.

Let us begin—in the fashionable manner—with our present situation. Many of us have not met before. Suppose we engage upon our first conversation. There is an imperative need to find topics of conversation no matter how inconsequential. As acquaintance grows into friendship, however, small talk becomes unnecessary. Pauses in the conversation cease to be embarrassing. And if, over a period of time, friendship should grow into intimacy then often there will be no need for words at all. Simply there is a shared happiness in being together. Now this constant human experience of a growing intimacy is basic to that classic progress in man's communion with God which has emerged from Christian experience and the writings of the saints.

It may be convenient to picture the progress as a ladder. The first rung on the ladder is discursive mental prayer. To attain this it is usually recommended (at any rate since the fifteenth

century) that a person should follow one or other of the accepted methods: methods, that is, of employing the memory, understanding and will in the business of prayer. This type of mental prayer is 'discursive' in that the work of thinking and reasoning is dominant. The second rung is usually referred to as affective prayer. This rather unsatisfactory name implies that the emphasis in this type of prayer has shifted from the reasoning and thinking faculty to the will; that the acts which make up prayer of this kind are acts of will rather than acts of mind.

The reason for this transition, of course, is, that, as through discursive prayer, the spiritual truths gain a firmer and firmer grip on the mind, less time is needed to review them and the time of prayer is increasingly taken up with the consequent acts of adoration and sorrow and love. To pass, at the right time, from discursive to affective prayer is one of the most important points in this classic progress, since to remain unduly in discursive prayer is to invite a puzzled frustration of effort which not infrequently leads to fatal discouragement. For initiation into affective prayer, there are again approved methods. Several recommendations are to be found round about the fourth week in the Spiritual Exercises and the Sulpician method also has particular relevance to affective prayer. The next stage beyond this is one of lessening activity. The acts which constitute affective prayer become less varied, more repetitive and gradually fewer in number. This is the transition to the third rung of the ladder—the prayer of simplicity. This type of prayer has been well portrayed by Bossuet: 'One must accustom oneself to nourish the soul by a simple loving gaze on God and on Jesus Christ; to attain this result, one must gently free the soul from reasonings, from arguments and from the multitude of affections (i.e. acts of will) in order to keep it simple, respectful and attentive and thus have it draw closer and closer to God, its first principle and its last end. . . . Meditation is excellent in its proper time, and highly profitable at the outset of the spiritual life; but one must not linger there since the soul by its fidelity in mortifying and in recollecting itself, ordinarily becomes the recipient of a purer and a more intimate kind of prayer which one may call the prayer of simplicity, and which consists in a simple view, regard or loving thought on some divine object, be it God himself, or some of his mysteries, or any other Christian truth. The soul

puts aside reasoning and employs a gentle contemplation which keeps it at peace, attentive and docile to the divine operations and impressions which the Holy Ghost communicates; it does little and receives much; its labour is sweet yet very fruitful; and since it approaches nearer to the source of all light, of all grace, and of all virtue, it receives a still greater share in all these gifts.'

The whole progress of prayer so far, then, has been a process of simplification. The simplification of reasoning led to the stage of affective acts and the simplification of affective acts has led now to the prayer of simplicity.

The next stage—the fourth rung of the ladder—is concerned more with God's action. It is the stage of infused contemplation. In the passage already quoted, Bossuet called the prayer of simplicity 'a gentle contemplation'. Indeed by many writers since the seventeenth century, especially the Carmelites, the prayer of simplicity is called acquired contemplation. It is clearly a form of contemplation—a 'simple view'. This simple view, Bossuet noted, 'keeps the soul docile to the divine operations'. This is to say that it prepares and disposes the soul for infused contemplation. The transition between these two forms of contemplation—acquired and passive—is again well portrayed by Bossuet: 'Then we must not scatter our efforts in trying to produce other acts or different dispositions, but we must simply be mindful of the presence of God, remaining exposed to his divine gaze, continuing in this devout thought as long as our Lord gives us such a grace; not hastening to do anything except what is done in us, since this is a prayer with God alone, a union which eminently contains all the other special dispositions and prepares the soul for that passive state wherein God becomes the sole Master of our inner life and wherein he operates more particularly. In this state, the less the creatures labours, the more powerfully does God act; and since God's operation constitutes a rest, the soul becomes, in this kind of prayer, in a way like unto him, and receives during it wonderful graces.'

In the *Living Flame* St John of the Cross makes clear that this fourth stage of prayer is essentially a gift of God, something which cannot be attained by any human effort. 'There is between the two states (acquired and infused contemplation) all the difference which exists between divine and human work, between natural and supernatural operation. Such souls do not act of themselves

but are under the action of the Holy Ghost; he is the principal agent, the guide, the mover in this state, and ceases not to watch over them and lead them as so many instruments in his hands towards perfection through Faith and the Divine Law, through the Spirit which God imparts to each one.'

We have seen then that this stage is predominantly concerned with God's activity in the soul. What is it that God does in the soul? God produces in the soul an obscure yet vivid because quasi-experimental knowledge of himself.<sup>1</sup> By this knowledge God draws from the soul freely a love beyond anything known in the earlier stages of prayer. In the first of his Sermons on the Song of Songs, St Bernard describes this love as a 'canticle of love of love which the anointing of grace alone teaches and experience alone makes the soul familiar with. Those who have had experience of it know it well; let those who have not had that happiness earnestly desire it, not to know it, but to experience it. It is not a cry from the mouth but the gladness of the heart; not the sounding of the lips but the impulse and emotion of joys within; not a concert of words, but of wills moving in harmony. It is not heard without, nor does it make a sound in public. Only she who sings and he in whose honour it is sung that is the Bridegroom and the bride, hear the accents of that song.' Such quotations emphasise the common teaching that this fourth stage is beyond adequate description.

It might seem from what has been said so far that once a soul has entered upon this fourth stage of prayer—infused contemplation—the spiritual life is nothing but joy and light. In the writings of the saints however nothing is more clear than that this is not the case. There is no sanctity without the cross. Prayer such as we have just described obviously demands great purity. In order to effect the necessary purification and in order to prepare souls for still greater heights of contemplation God sends various trials—'nights' as they are called by St John of the Cross. He distinguishes two nights and the first of these—because it is meant

<sup>1</sup> 'Delivered from the world of sense and the world of thought, the soul enters into the mysterious darkness of a holy ignorance, and dismissing all scientific knowledge, it loses itself in Him who can neither be seen nor apprehended; it gives itself over completely to this Sovereign Object and belongs no longer to itself or to any other. It is united to the Unknown by the noblest part of its being in virtue of its renouncement of knowledge; finally it draws forth from this utter ignorance a knowledge that the intellect would not be able to attain.'

to detach the soul from things of sense—he calls the night of the senses. In this night the soul is afflicted with aridity coupled with a confused longing for God. Often there are severe temptations—against faith or hope or chastity. Sometimes scruples deprive the soul of peace. The purpose of all this suffering St John explains by a famous comparison: ‘The first action of material fire on fuel is to dry it, to expel from it all the water and all the moisture. It blackens it at once and soils it, and drying it by little and little makes it light and consumes all its foulness and blackness which are contrary to itself. Finally, having heated and set on fire its outward surface, it transforms the whole into itself and makes it as beautiful as itself. The fuel under these conditions retains neither active nor passive qualities of its own, except bulk and weight, and assumes all the properties of fire. It becomes dry, being dry it glows, and glowing, burns; luminous, it gives light and burns more quickly than before. All this is the property and effect of fire. It is in this way that we have to reason about the divine fire of contemplative love, which before it unites with and transforms the soul into itself, purges away all its contrary qualities. It expels its impurities, blackens it and obscures it, and thus its condition is apparently worse than it was before. For a while the divine purgation is removing all the evil and vicious humours, which, because so deeply rooted and settled in the soul, were neither seen nor felt, but now in order to their expulsion and annihilation, are rendered clearly visible in the dim light of the divine contemplation; the soul—though no worse in itself nor in the sight of God—seeing at last what it never saw before, looks upon itself not only as unworthy of his regard, but even as a loathsome object and that God does loath it.’ (*Dark Night*, ii, 10.)

As a result of all this, then, prayer loses its facility and becomes painful; the virtues once attractive seem hard and forbidding. The duration of this trial varies according to the designs of God—the saints have been so afflicted for long periods; though often in souls called to a less exalted degree of holiness, these sufferings are correspondingly less severe and less prolonged. If the heights of contemplation are to be reached this is not the end of suffering—the soul must yet pass through the still more terrible night of the spirit. But between these two nights there is a period of peace and joy which is mainly characterized, according to St Teresa, by the suspension of the activity of the interior and exterior

faculties and by the vividly felt presence of God within the soul.

God calls some souls further still. These must first pass through the night of the spirit. In the mind there is the pain of God's purity, too blindingly bright to the weakness and dullness of the souls, and in the will the pain of spiritual dereliction. Prayer, we are told, becomes almost impossible.

These two nights—with their intervals of consolation—we may regard as the transition from the fourth rung on the ladder of prayer to what seems to be the final attainment of the mystic's life, an immediate preparation for the Beatific Vision: this fifth stage is usually referred to as the 'transforming union' or the 'spiritual marriage'. These names point to the intimacy of this final union. It is a blending of two lives, explained by St Teresa through this comparison: 'Here it is like water descending from heaven into a river or spring, where one is so mixed with the other that it cannot be discovered which is the river-water and which is the rain-water.' (*Interior Castle*, 7.) Such then in outline is the progress of prayer.

All that, of course, is an extremely rough outline, taking no account of the differences in terminology to be found in various schools of spirituality, taking no account either of points of controversy. But perhaps as a working guide, easily remembered, that image of a ladder with five rungs will suffice. From discursive meditation to affective prayer—from affective prayer to the prayer of simplicity—from the prayer of simplicity to infused contemplation—from infused contemplation through the two nights with their interval of light to the final union of the spiritual marriage. That is the rough pattern according to which souls normally seem to progress in prayer—though of course God is in no way restricted to it and each soul differs.

Now what of the essentials of prayer? Most of us feel that we are a long way down the ladder—surely it isn't necessary to know even that amount of ascetical theology before we pray—and anyway, don't there seem to be things we have left out? Where for example does the liturgy fit in? And vocal prayer? And the need that grows from prayer and finds expression in the Mass—the need for sacrifice? According to the books there is a multitude of points to be looked to—proximate and remote preparations and so on. Where amid all these things are the essentials of prayer? I would like to suggest that the essential of our

prayer is that it should be, in the fullest and deepest sense, Christian: that it should conform to the prayer of Christ. During all the changes in a soul's progress through prayer, two elements are constant in different degrees of emphasis—the mind and the will: knowing and loving. That is because prayer as we said in the beginning is a communion with God and two persons are united only by knowing and loving each other. But these two elements are found *in their perfection* only in the prayer of Christ. 'No one knows the Father except the Son'; for the Son is the Word:—'the radiance of his Father's splendour and the full expression of his being.' And the mutual love of Father and Son is the Holy Spirit. For the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity, knowing and Loving constitute the closest possible union—unity of substance. *Non in unius singularitate personae sed in unius Trinitate substantiae.*

So Christ's prayer is the most perfect communion with God. Our prayer must be conformed to his: that is surely the essential. First knowing God. There is no doubt that to pray we must know about God; but more than that is necessary. We must know God, we must have what one can only call a sense of God. In his book *Living Christianity* Count de la Bedoyere has pointed out that a lack of this sense can easily lead to a dangerous unreality about all the spiritual life. There is urgent need to grow in a sense of the majesty and sanctity and nearness of God. If our lives are lived in this awareness of God, there will be no need for an elaborate preparation at time of prayer. Prayer will simply be an intensification of that recollection in God. To go through lengthy introductory exercises would be like leaving a person in whose company we had been for a long time, solely in order to make a fresh entry at each new conversation.

Secondly, loving God. From the Son's knowledge of the Father there flows his love, which is the Holy Spirit. And as our knowledge of God (our sense of God) grows, so there will flow from it our love, the image of his Spirit. And so the essential energies of our prayer, knowing and loving, increasingly conformed to Christ's perfect knowing and loving, will carry us to closer and closer union with God. But such conformity by mere imitation is far from laying hold on the really essential knowing and loving of prayer. This, more than anything else, is what I want to say. It is not the Christian vocation merely

to be like Christ. It is the Christian vocation to put on Christ, to be drawn up into him, to live in him that he may live in us. We have come to that fact which is the source of all Christian living; that fact which gives new depths of meaning to every Christian act—the fact of grace.

How by grace do we live in Christ and he in us? It is a sharing of his life. And what is his life? It is that knowing and loving of the Father we have spoken of. So grace is a sharing in his knowing and his loving. We know the father with his shared knowing; we love the Father with his shared loving. He knows and loves the Father in and through us. By grace then we share the life of God and because we share his life we are his sons, and because we are his sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying *Abba, Father*.

There, surely, in Galatians 4, 6, is the essential of Christian prayer: that it is the prayer of Christ, coming from his Spirit of Love, which Spirit we share by grace. That is the essential of all Christian prayer, vocal, mental, and in the oneness of his Spirit, liturgical. It will be for other papers to expound the particular expressions of this essential fact.

To sum up, the traditional path of progress through prayer is a series of stages differing in the manner and emphasis of knowing and loving. The essential of all our prayer—whatever its stage—is that it should be in the fullest sense Christian, conformed to Christ's knowing and loving of the Father which is his Divine life. This conformity to Christ—the essential of our prayer—is not merely a matter of imitation. It is, whether recognized by the Christian or not, a real sharing in Christ's knowing and loving. Christ knows and loves and so prays in and through every prayer of the Christian—vocal, mental, and in a special manner liturgical. So progress in prayer can surely mean nothing other than a progressive realization and living of the fact of grace.

I would like to end with a plea that all our presentation of doctrine in writing and preaching should be built on a simple yet vivid explanation of the doctrine of grace. That grace is a sharing of God's one life—that a shared life means the closest possible union between the sharers (the branches of the vine, the members of the Body) that we are redeemed only because of our oneness in and with Christ—that all God's economy of salvation (Mass, sacraments, prayer, and engraced activity) has no



purpose or result other than to deepen our oneness in and with Christ. If this wonderful truth had the place in our preaching and writing that it should have, at least two results of incalculable value would follow. Firstly, there would be a great deepening and vivifying of the spirituality of our people. They would pray, conscious of Christ's prayer in them; they would not merely attend Mass but would know that one with Christ the Priest they offered Mass and one with Christ the Victim they are offered. They would know the teaching Church for the living Christ it is; they would know sacramental absolution for the living contact it is with Christ redeeming; they would know Holy Communion for the deepening of their common life in and with Christ—something so much more than a private devotion. They would know that Christ lives in their ordinary living, that he works in their work, that he suffers in their sufferings, that he is glad in their joy: that all their lives are endowed now with the dignity and redemptive power of God's only-begotten Son. If our people's religion had all that inwardness and vividness and oneness with ordinary living, would the leakage be as large as it is—would the liturgical movement find the going so hard—would there not be more sense of community—would not the good layman more easily be accorded his true place in the Church's life and have an apostolate other than merely 'helping the priest'? Is it not a fact that many of our people have no notion of grace except as a white liquid poured into the soul at Baptism, soiled by venial sin and lost by mortal sin? There is no adequate explanation of grace in the catechism—a 'gift of God freely bestowed for our sanctification and salvation': but what sort of gift? and how does it sanctify and save?

And the second result of preaching and writing the doctrine of grace would be an end, of the calamitous fragmentation of Christian teaching. Our incorporation into Christ by grace is the sole source of all our Christian living. That is why prayer cannot be adequately understood or practised except as bound up with the Mass and sacraments and the daily actions of ordinary living. Mr Watkin has expressed the matter with clarity and force: 'A sufficient Catholic education, which imparts a living organic and interior knowledge of the Catholic religion, is now literally a matter of life and death. The Catholic today as he grows out of his childish acceptance must either go in to an interior vision of

Catholic truth or go out of the Church. However many individual exceptions there may still be due to the interference of other factors, the alternative faces us inexorably. Come in or go out. You cannot stay on the surface. There is no foothold left there. The Catholic religion is no aggregate of isolated dogmas. It is an organism of the truth in which every doctrine is determined by its place in the whole and derives its meaning from that whole. Therefore no knowledge of isolated dogmas can disclose the meaning of the Catholic religion as a whole, or of those dogmas themselves. We might as well hope to understand a bodily organ from a mere description of its shape, size and composition without regard to its function in the body. But this organic knowledge of the organism of living Catholic truth must be an interior knowledge which penetrates to the centre, whence the whole and its parts are perceived and become mutually intelligible. Our knowledge of an animal is very imperfect as compared with our knowledge of man. For our knowledge of the former is of necessity largely external. Though we can indeed discover the functions of the animal's bodily organs, in relation to the whole body, we cannot apprehend the life of the organism from within. This however we can do in the case of the human organism, because being human we know it from within. Since, by grace, we are incorporated into the Catholic organism, its soul, the Holy Spirit, dwells in our own, and we ourselves are members receiving a vital influx from the Head, Jesus Christ. The Catholic is thus able to apprehend directly the vital principle of the Catholic religion, to experience Catholicism from within as a living whole. In the Liturgy—particularly in the psalm read on roughly half the days in the year—Psalm 118—there is a recurrent prayer for 'intellectus'—intellect. This is precisely that interior and vital knowledge of which I am speaking. It is, in fact, presented as the source of life: 'give me intellect and I shall live'.

The conclusion then would seem to be that the essential of our prayer is the essential of every other Christian act—incorporation by grace into Christ. The more vivid our living of that fact, the more our prayer will progress, at any rate to some extent, through that simplification and suffering outlined in the beginning. So that with an ever-increasing identification our voice will become the voice of that Spirit by which alone we cry *Abba*, Father.