

PRAYER AND LIFE

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It is a joy to have the opportunity of bearing witness to something that strikes me and touches my heart, to something that impresses us, at times in a lightning flash, for only a moment or permanently, in the context and situations of our lives. The witness I bear is to the things our eyes have seen, our hands have touched, our ears have grasped; it is a witness to those things that have enlightened our understanding, deepened our hearts, directed our will and affected our very bodies, making them more obedient to grace.

I have to speak about prayer and action, but I should particularly like to talk to you about prayer, or rather about the aspect of that complex situation which is both prayer and action, and is constantly revealed in effective thinking, in a life grounded in the deepest possible reflection and a truly lucid understanding of the situations in which we live.

I. THE LINK BETWEEN PRAYER AND ACTION

First, I would like to say a few words on the relation that exists, not in general terms but somewhat distinctly, between life and prayer, approaching this question from a hitherto unexplored angle. All too often the life we lead attests against the prayer we offer, and it is only when we have managed to harmonize the terms of our prayer with our way of life that our prayer acquires the strength, the splendour and the efficacy which we expect it to yield.

All too often we address the Lord hoping that he will do what we ought to do in his name and in his service. All too often our prayers are elegant, well-prepared discourses, grown stale moreover with the passing of centuries, which we offer to the Lord from day to day, as if it sufficed to repeat to him from year to year, with a cold heart and a dull mind, ardent words that were born in the desert and the wilderness, in the greatest of human sufferings, in the most intense situations that history has ever known. We reiterate prayers bearing the names of the great spiritual leaders, and we believe that God listens to them, that he takes account of their content, whereas the only thing that matters to the Lord is the heart of the person addressing him, the will straining to do his will.

We say: "Lord, lead us not into temptation"; then, with a light step, eager and full of hope, we go straight to where temptation lies in wait for us. Or else we cry: "Lord, Lord, my heart is ready". But for what? If the Lord were to ask us this question one evening when we have said these words before going to bed, would we not sometimes be obliged to answer "ready to finish the chapter I have begun in this detective novel". At that moment it is the only thing for which our hearts are ready. And there are so many occasions on which our prayer remains a dead letter, a letter that kills moreover, because each time we allow our prayer to be dead, instead of making us alive and yielding to us the intensity which it possesses intrinsically, we become increasingly less sensitive to its drive, its impact, and increasingly incapable of living the prayer we utter.

This raises a problem which must be resolved in the life of each individual; we have to transform all the terms of our prayer into rules of life. If we have told the Lord that we are seeking his help in order to resist temptation, we have to avoid every occasion of temptation with all the energy of our soul, with all the strength at our disposal. If we have told the Lord that we are heartbroken at the thought that someone is hungry, thirsty or lonely, we must, however, listen to the voice of the Lord replying: "Whom shall I send?," and stand before him saying: "Here I am, Lord," and become active without delay. We should never delay sufficiently to allow a superfluous thought to creep into our good intention, insinuating itself between God's injunction and the action we are about to perform, because the thought that then slips in like a serpent will immediately suggest to us: "Later," or "Do I really have to? Can't God choose someone who is more free to do his will than I am?" And while we beat about the bush, the energy which prayer and the divine response had communicated to us will fade away and die within us.

So here we are dealing with something essential, namely a link we have to establish between life and prayer through an act of will, an act which we ourselves perform, which will never be accomplished on its own and can nonetheless transform our lives most profoundly. Read the prayers that are set out for you in the morning and evening office. Select any one of these prayers and make it a rule of life; you will then see that this prayer will never become boring or stale, because with each passing day it will be sharpened, quickened by life itself. Once you have asked the Lord to protect you throughout the day against some compulsion, temptation or difficulty which you have made it your duty to overcome to the best of your ability and despite your human weakness, and your being is filled like a mainsail with the divine breath and power, you will have many things to tell God when you stand before him in the evening. You will have to thank him for the help you have received, you will have to repent for the use you have made of it; you will be able to rejoice that he has given you the strength to do his will with your own weak and frail hands, your poor human hands, and allowed you to be his seeing gaze, his heedful ear, his footstep, his love, his incarnate, living, creative compassion. Now here is something that can only be achieved through individual effort, and unless this effort is made, life and prayer become dissociated. For a while life carries on as usual, and prayer continues its droning which becomes less and less distinct, less and less disquieting for our conscience; the steadfastness of prayer decreases. And since life makes demands on us whereas prayer comes from God, a timid, loving God who calls us and never imposes himself on us by brute force, the result is that prayer fades away. Then we console ourselves by saying that we have now embodied our prayer in action; the work of our hands alone represents our worship. Yet this is not the attitude we adopt towards our friends, our parents, and those we love. Indeed, on occasions, perhaps always, we do everything we ought to do for their sake; but does this imply that we forget them in our hearts, that our thoughts never turn to them? Of course not! Could it be that God alone enjoys that privilege of being served without ever receiving a glance from us, without our hearts ever becoming fervent and loving at the sound of his Name? Could it be that God alone is served with indifference? This question gives us something to think about and something to achieve.

II. THE INTEGRATION OF PRAYER INTO LIFE

There is yet another aspect of this prayer connected with life. It is the integration of prayer into life itself. At every moment we are faced with insurmountable situations. If only we brought prayer to bear upon such situations, we would find, with the passing of each day and each hour, more opportunities than we ever imagined of making our prayer become and remain steadfast. Do we sufficiently remind ourselves that our human vocation transcends all human possibilities? Are we not called to be living members of Christ's Body, to be in some way, both collectively and individually, an extension into our time of Christ's incarnate presence? Are we not called to become participants in the divine nature? Therein resides our human vocation expressed in its most essential form, and in addition to all this our vocation is as far-reaching as the will and action of God. We are called to be the presence of the living God in the whole world of his creation. Can we accomplish anything in this direction without God doing it within us and through us? Of course not. How else could we become living members of Christ's Body? How could we receive the Holy Spirit as the temples in which he dwells without being destroyed by the divine fire? How could we truly become participants in this divine nature? And how could we, as the sinners we are, do the work of charity, the work of divine love, which we are called to accomplish? Does this not provide us with a permanent reason for prayer, not merely a progression, an urgent summons to emphasize this prayer, but to be grafted on to the life-giving vine? What kind of life is ours? What fruit can we bear? What can we do? One fact must strike us from the outset; if we do not wish our prayer and our life to become dissociated, and our prayer to fade away gradually, broken by the demands of a hard and cruel life, by the effort of the prince of this world, we have to integrate our prayer into everything that constitutes our life, to throw it like a handful of yeast into that dough which is our life in its totality. Were we to get up in the morning and stand before the Lord, saying: "Bless me, O Lord, and bless this dawning day"; were we only to realize that we are beginning a new day of creation, such as never existed before, a day dawning like an unexplored and infinitely profound possibility! Were we only to realize under God's blessing that we are venturing into it in order to fulfill our task as Christians, bearing in mind all the force and glory implied by the word Christian, with what respect, earnestness and contained joy, with what hope and tenderness we would witness the gradual unfolding of that day! With each passing hour, we would receive it as a gift of God; we would receive every circumstance that befalls us as from the Lord's hands. No encounter would be fortuitous; each person crossing our path, every utterance that holds our attention would summon us to respond not in the manner we sometimes adopt at the purely human level, but with all the depth of our faith, with all the depth of man's profound heart which contains God's Kingdom and God himself in its inmost recesses. And in the course of that day we would be accompanied by a sense of the sacred, a sense of going forth with God; at every moment we would be faced with situations calling for wisdom, and we would have to ask for wisdom; situations calling for strength, and we would pray that the Lord might grant us strength; situations calling for God's forgiveness because of our failings, and awakening within us a surge of gratitude because - despite our unworthiness, our blindness, our coldness - he had enabled us to do what we could not possibly achieve by our own efforts. Similar examples could be multiplied, but the meaning of the problem is clear. Then we would realize that life can never form an

obstacle to prayer - never, for life itself constitutes the living substance into which we throw that life-giving handful of yeast which is our prayer, our presence, in so far as we ourselves abide in God and God in us, or are at least straining towards him while he stretches a hand to us. This is something we could often achieve but two things hold us back: the first is that we are not accustomed to the effort of prayer. If we do not make this effort with perseverance, gradually training ourselves meanwhile to make increasingly sustained, constant and prolonged efforts, after a while our spiritual strength, our mental energy, our attentiveness, and also our ability to make a heartfelt response to sudden events and to the people we encounter, all die within us. As we gain experience of constant prayer, grounded in life, we must learn how to make good use of the sobriety counselled by the Fathers: we have to proceed step by step, bearing in mind that there is an ascesis calling for tranquillity as well as one demanding effort; that there is a wisdom which applies to the body, the intellect and the will, and that one cannot ceaselessly strive to attain a goal, exerting all one's strength. You may perhaps recall this episode in the life of St John the Evangelist. It is said that a hunter, having learnt that Christ's beloved disciple lived in the hills near Ephesus, set out to find him. He came to a glade where he saw an old man who was crouching on the grass and playing with a guinea-fowl. Coming up to the old man, the hunter asked him whether he had ever heard of John and where the latter could be found. John replied: "I am the man". The hunter laughed outright: "You are John? How can that be? Is it likely that an old man playing with a fowl would be the one who wrote those wonderful epistles?" Whereupon the old man replied: "I see by your attire that you are a hunter. When you go hunting in the woods, don't you always keep your bow stretched and your arrow poised in case an animal came in sight?" Once again the hunter laughed at him, saying: "I was certain that you were a madman. Who would go about the woods in the way you describe? If I were to keep my bow constantly stretched, the string would snap just when I needed it". "The same applies to me", answered John, "for if I constantly strained all the strength of my soul and my body, they would snap at the very moment of God's approach through an effort they could no longer sustain". We must know how to achieve, with moderation and wisdom, the relaxation we need in order to act with all the intensity, all the strength, that are not only ours but a gift of divine grace. For grace is given to us in the frailty of our bodies, in the frailty of our minds, our hearts and our will.

III. THE OBSTACLE: LACK OF FAITH

Among the difficulties encountered in prayer, a further obstacle is lack of faith. Whatever clothes we may wear, whatever professions we may have exercised in our lives, we so often experience a moment of hesitation, a lack of deep faith. We frequently declare that "intercessory prayer and petitionary prayer are inferior forms of prayer. The monk's prayer, the prayer of the Christian who has reached a certain maturity, is thanksgiving and praise". This is indeed the goal to which we attain in the long run. At the end of a long life devoted to spiritual and physical ascesis, when we are radically detached from everything and ready to receive all things from God's hands as a precious gift, it only remains for us to thank and praise him. But have we yet reached this goal? Is it not easier to thank the Lord for what he has done or to praise him for what he is, especially in those moments when our hearts are kindled by the touch of grace? Is it not easier to thank or praise him after the event than trustfully to ask him to grant some request?

Very often, people who are well able to give thanks and praise to the Lord are not capable of making a complete act of faith, with an undivided heart, an unwavering mind and a will wholly straining towards him, because the following doubt arises: "What if he does not answer my prayer?" Would it not be simpler to say: "Thy will be done"? Then everything is for the best, for God's will is bound to be done, and I shall be at one with this divine will. Yet it so constantly and frequently happens that the essential requirement is different. It is different precisely in relation to "active life", in the sense that this expression is used in the Western world, namely a life oriented towards situations that are external to us. Someone we love is stricken with an illness; famine prevails in a country. We would like to seek God's help, and very often we are cowardly enough to ask for it in such a way that, whatever happens, our prayer might apply to the given situation. We find the terms and the poles of our prayer: God's will is bound to be done in the long run, and we will be satisfied; but have we made an act of faith? This raises a problem for all those who are engaged in active life, and who believe in the efficacious action of prayer and of effective passivity.

If we wish to act with God, it does not suffice to leave him a free hand and to say: "In any case, Lord, you will only do what you wish to do; so get on with it and don't let me hinder you". We have to learn to discern God's will, we have to agree with his plan, but we must also understand that his plan is sometimes hidden. Remember the Canaanite woman. The evidence presented to her sight and her hearing made it manifestly clear that her request was being refused; and yet the intensity of her faith, the acuteness of her spiritual hearing perceived something else, and she knew how to insist against God's apparent will in favour of the Lord's real will. We must know how to look, how to go in search of the Lord's invisible trail. The Lord is like an embroidress working on a tapestry; only, as it has been pointed out more than once, we see the wrong side of the tapestry, the right side being the one that faces God. And the problem of life, of that vision which will cause our prayer to be not in opposition to God's will but in harmony with it, consists in knowing how to examine that wrong side at length in order to perceive the right side, how to look at the way in which God fashions history, directs a life, deepens a situation, creates a system of relationships, and how to act not against him, or independently, but with him, allowing him to act, enabling him to act with us and in us. For in this case, there is a continuity between action and contemplation, provided that we do not accept a desacralized action, an action from which God is absent, an action envisaged as wholly human and grounded in our own human energies. That is neither a Christian action nor a Christian prayer. In the very heart of the situation of the active man who wishes his action to be the continuation of God's work, who wishes the action of the Church and his own action, as a living member of the total Christ which is the Church, to be the act of Christ, the act of the living God, the word of the living God, we have to learn a form of contemplation, a way of being contemplative that discloses to us what is truly the will of God. Apart from that every action will be an act performed haphazardly.

IV. THE ROLE OF CONTEMPLATION

1. The Search for the Vision of Things as God Sees Them.

What, then, is the nature of this contemplation? It is the function, the constant, unceasing situation of the Christian, irrespective of his position: he may belong to a contemplative Order, or to any other Order; or again he may be simply a layman who is doubly committed, that is, committed in relation to God and, by that very fact, totally committed in relation to all the rest of the created world, the world of men and things. The first fact to note is that this contemplation is a steady gaze, an attentive gaze, deriving from a lucid mind, concentrating on things, people and events, on both their static reality and their dynamism. It is a gaze fixed wholly on its object, and at the same time an ear wholly straining towards what it will hear, what will reach it from without. And to achieve this calls for a very definite and indispensable asceticism, for one must know how to be self-detached in order to see and hear. As long as we remain self-centred, we can only see a reflection of ourselves in the things that surround us, or a reflection of what surrounds us in the restless, troubled waters of our conscience. We must know how to be silent in order to hear; we must know how to gaze earnestly before believing that we have seen. We have to be at once free of ourselves and given over to God and to the object of his contemplation. Only then will we be able to see things in their objective reality. Only then will we be able to ask the essential question: what does God want in this reality which has become clear to us? For the unreal world in which we are constantly evolving is one we create in our imagination, through intellectual laziness or selfishness, because we believe ourselves to be at the centre of things whereas we dwell so much on their outer surface. God can do nothing in that unreal world for the simple reason that it does not exist. There is no such thing as a world of unreal things in which God could act, but in the world of reality he is the ruler. And the ugliest of realities, the most hateful, the most infamous, the most alien to the Kingdom, can become the Kingdom, but only on condition that we render unto it its quality of reality. A mirage cannot be transfigured, yet a sinner can become a saint. It is essential, in my view, that we should foster this kind of contemplation, which has a universal significance, is unrelated to any role we might assume in life, and is simply an attentive search through reflection, prayer, silence, and the deepening of the vision of things as God sees them. It has been said that prayer begins at the moment when God is the one who speaks. This is the goal towards which we must strive. The contemplation we have described is not specific to the Christian; it is universal. No human mind can escape being oriented in this way towards external realities. The difference between ourselves and the atheist - namely, the person who only believes in the things that surround him and sees in them no depth of eternity, of immensity, of relation to God - the only difference is that the atheist observes phenomena, whereas we listen to the word of God who gives us the key to them. The difference seems small, yet everything hinges on it. For if we thus acquire the mind of Christ, if we are guided in the manner of the apostles (a manner that has not passed away with time), if we are guided by the Holy Spirit who enjoins us to go forth and act, to speak and to be silent, we are most certainly in the situation of the Christian.

2. The Problem of Commitment and the Contemplative Orders.

It is clear that in the Christian experience as we know it there is a contemplative aspect in the technical sense of that word (the contemplative Orders). This sense gives rise to a great problem. The contemplative Orders are harshly criticized, but are they criticized

as unjustly as their members would believe? There is much discussion about the credibility or incredibility of the message as the latter is handed on to us by the Christian life, the structures and the historical situation of the Church. There was a time when the sense of contemplation, the sense of the sacred, the sense of the living God - a God not only present but transcendent - was truly intense, and Christendom beheld some of its members wholly immersed in contemplation, contemplative prayer, silence, the divine presence, as part of the total functioning of the Church. But today this is no longer the case. The Christian people as a whole do not always feel jointly involved in this search for radical contemplation, and we religious must tackle the problem not merely by educating them but by being aware of the dilemma we are creating for them, and which is made all the more acute by the fact that the contemplative Orders can only exist because of active people. In one way or another contemplatives depend on the charity of those who are not engaged in contemplation. And when the countless people who work and toil fail to understand that this particular group is an expression of their own life, and not of the religious group's limited and specialized life, they withhold their sympathy as well as their support. I feel that this is a very important point because our present world seems to find no difficulty at all in accepting the contemplative life of Hindu ascetics, for instance. It willingly accepts the socially useless life of the artist; it willingly accepts those who dissociate themselves and withdraw from the essential group, but on one condition: namely, that these people should pay the price of their dissociation. What carries conviction in the case of the Hindu ascetics, for instance, is their ability to lead a life as harsh as the circumstances they create for themselves. But the factor that often does not carry conviction in the case of our contemplative Orders is that we wish to contemplate, but also wish to be fed and kept warm, to have a roof over our heads, a garden, and all manner of things. And these things have to be provided for us by those who are deprived of the comfort of contemplation. This raises a very real problem, not for the conscience of non-Christians, but precisely for that of Christians. Let us consider for a moment those often illusory vows which we take. We forsake our family, our father, our mother, and our relatives, and we recreate for ourselves another family which is much more abiding, primarily because it does not die. Fathers, mothers, brothers and even children might die before you. Your Order will only die subsequently to you, unless you have indeed destroyed it. We take a vow of poverty; obviously we are without personal resources, but we are lacking in one essential thing: we never have to cope with the insecurity felt by the man in the street. For what constitutes the serious problem is not lack of food or lack of clothing, but the radical insecurity that might beset a person because he does not know what will happen tomorrow. I could cite numerous features of this contemplative life which sometimes cause more people than we imagine to desire it. They understand contemplation, they are frequently engrossed in contemplation, their prayer is profound, they hear the voice of the living God, they obey his commandments, they live not on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God, and they do not manage to grasp why these human groups, these specialists, do not assume the responsibility of their commitment: some commit themselves whilst others pay for their upkeep.

3. The True Message of the Contemplation Bearing on God and Men.

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to yet another aspect of that contemplative moment: when we speak of contemplation, we are inclined to think only of monks, or of contemplatives who belong to non-Christian religions. We do not sufficiently realize how much contemplation goes on in the world among people who, coping quite simply with the present situation that gives rise to fundamental problems, are not merely content to observe the way in which things develop with a view to tackling these problems, but also ask themselves certain questions. Look at the young people and the adults of our time, even those who are not integrated into the Church: with what earnestness and depth, and on occasions with what flashes of insight and penetration, they try to understand. They ponder the question of God, of man, of the material existence surrounding us. Sometimes they turn to us in the hope of finding an answer that is not a slogan, an answer that brings the intensity of a life's experience to the problem facing them; they know how to look, how to listen, they know how to elicit the constituent elements of the situations in which we find ourselves; but what they cannot do is to bind them into sheafs; what they are incapable of doing is to find the key and the code which would enable them to read the enigma of the Economy of salvation, the active, profound and total will of the living God, wholly involved in the history of this world. Now here is something we might have done, but do we practise that kind of contemplation? God continually reveals himself in the Old and the New Testaments, but there are new aspects of this revelation which could constantly hold our attention. Are we sufficiently aware of this? Much can be learnt from the experience of the Russian people. Before the Revolution there were so many Russians who knew the God of the cathedrals, of structures and of the "established Church"! When they found themselves deprived of all their possessions and only God remained for them in their total destitution, how many of them discovered what we might call the God of the underworld, that God who accepted a complete and unlimited solidarity, a total and permanent solidarity, not only with those who were bereft of everything, but also with those who, according to human views, would have been rejected from the Kingdom of God.

Have we truly discovered that God who is vulnerable, defenceless, apparently conquered, and therefore detestable, that God who is not ashamed of us because he was willing to become one of us, and of whom we need not be ashamed because he became our fellow-man through an act of wonderful solidarity? We do, indeed, speak about him, we preach him, and yet we constantly try to escape from that God in order to reintegrate him into the human grandeur of a structured faith and of a religion attuned to the notions of earthly greatness, splendour and beauty. All these things do, of course, have a rightful place. But how tragic it is that we should allow that God to escape us when he is so comprehensible to millions of people for whom our cathedrals and our liturgies remain meaningless. How many people could find their God if only we did not conceal him! And not only the destitute, the humiliated and the hungry of this world, but also those to whom we believe that God does not even spare a glance. Can we not grasp the meaning of that wonderful solidarity with the one who is bereft of God, with Christ on the cross who says: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Can any atheist in this world ever be said to have measured the loss of God, the deathly absence of God, in the manner of the Son of Man and the Son of God on the cross? When we say the words "He descended into hell" in the Apostles' Creed, do we realize

that hell is not the place of torment of Christian folklore, but that the hell of the Old Testament is the place from which God is absent, and that Christ went there in order to rejoin his brethren in an act of solidarity that continues the dereliction of the cross? Might we not then suppose that if we were to look at Christ, on the one hand, and at the world surrounding us, on the other, we would have a vibrant, splendid message to bring not only on God and on man, but also on the whole created world with its present scientific and technological achievements. Have we evolved a theology of matter to set against materialism? And yet what right have we to be without a theology of matter when we not only state that the Son of God became the Son of Man, that is, entered into the heart of history, but equally affirm that the Word became flesh, that God actually united himself to the materiality of this world? Does not the Incarnation provide us with an initial indication of this, and does not the Transfiguration yield us a vision of what matter is capable of becoming when it is penetrated with the divine presence? Does the Gospel not tell us that Christ's body, his garments and everything that surrounded him were resplendent with the light of eternity? Do we not know that in the Ascension Christ was clothed in human flesh, in other words bore the matter of this world with him into the heaven of heavens; do we not know that Christ carried up our created world into the depths of the divine? These are but brief indications, yet do they not provide the elements of a theology of matter which could raise these questions and attempt to answer them - a theology which could compel recognition at the industrial and technological level, and modify our outlook with regard to our activity in this world? Are we not called to be both the masters and the servants of this world? For we must indeed master it, but in order to lead it to fullness of life in God, and contemplation on this subject is being endlessly pursued at present. It is the problem of man, of the technician, the problem of people who require us to give answers and only receive platitudes. And here we could unite action to this contemplation, by which I mean this deepened vision, enlightened by faith and filled with the sense of the sacred. We could associate action with contemplation in every sphere, not merely in our private and personal activities but in the mighty action which is now stirring up the whole of humanity. Man now stands at the heart of the problem. Man is a meeting-point between the believer and the non-believer; for if Marx was right in stating that the proletariat has no need of God, since man is its God, we too affirm that Man is our God: the Man Jesus Christ - bearing in mind all the implications of his incarnation and his divinity.

* - From "Lumen Vitae", Vol. XXIV, № 4 (II. Testimonies), 1969, Brussels, pp.608-620
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