

Prayer: A Personal Response to God's Presence

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We hear a great deal about Religious crisis, don't we? There are crises of authority and obedience, of Community life, of personal identity, of Religious poverty, etc. I am convinced that at the basis of it all is a crisis of faith. But there is no hope for improvement here unless individual persons begin to respond better to God in prayer. This is true, I think, both of lay people and of us religious.

The single, most important conviction I want to share with you is that prayer is a personal response to God's presence.

May I try to explain this? Either you and I are more important than God or God is more important than we are. The answer is obvious, isn't it? He is more important than we are. Further, if what God wants and does is more important than what we want or do, then more of our attention should be focused on what God is and does. Again, what God wants to say to us is more important for us than anything we may have to say to Him. And God does want to speak and communicate Himself to us.

When prayer becomes too self-centered, even if it is centered upon noble and holy desires, if the focus of our prayer is I, me, or my, we are going to be in difficulty.

Prayer is a personal response to God's presence. This means that God first makes Himself present to us. Prayer is our awareness and acknowledgment of God's presence. It is what God does to us, rather than anything we do. St. John reminds us that genuine love means first of all not that we love God (which may or may not be true), but that God first loves us. His love for us is more important than our love for Him. He wants and appreciates and is grateful for our love; but since His love for us is more important than our love for Him, His love deserves more of our attention.

It seems to me that there are three aspects of genuine prayer that we should keep in mind. First of all, if prayer is a personal response to God's presence, then, the beginning of prayer is to be aware of that presence, simply to acknowledge it, to be able to admit: "Yes, God my Father, You do love life into me. Yes, You love life and being into the things around me and into all that comes into my senses. You love talents and these longings into me" etc. The focus is on God and what God does.

I want to make a distinction. I know that the terms meditation and prayer are used interchangeable and that they are used differently by different authors. By religious meditation I mean thinking about God or what God does or about anything good, holy, or pious; but this is not prayer. When I am thinking about you, you are the focal point of my thoughts, but that is not communication with you. Prayer is a person-to-person communication with God. If I am thinking about God or the life of Christ and what he has done, that is holy, meritorious, good and helpful for prayer, but it is not essentially prayer.

Prayer is when "He" becomes "You", when I say, "Yes, God my Father, You love life into me," When I say to myself, "God loves life into me," that is meditation. Do you see how I am using the words? When there is a You-I relationship with the Father, Son and Spirit, I call this response genuine prayer. If there is a consideration of what He is and does, but not a You-I relationship, it may be helpful, good and holy, but it is not essentially prayer.

The First Step - Awareness

The basis or first step in prayer is for me to wake up and to face reality; to realize that He is present to me, that He loves breath and being a share of His own divine life and all my capacities into me, and to be able to say, "Yes, God my Father, You do love all this into me. Yes, Jesus my Brother, You do. Yes, God my Spirit, You do." That is to pray. If in the few minutes that we have during the times of private prayer, we do nothing else but merely make ourselves aware of the God who is already making Himself present to us, that experience in itself is profound prayer; it is fruitful prayer; it is even the beginnings of mystical prayer. This is a genuine opening up to God who communicates Himself to us if we only give him the opportunity.

There is a difference between persons and things. God is present to things; God saturates things with His presence, because He loves life and being into them. But there is no acknowledgment on the part of non-personal things; they are incapable of prayer. You and I, however, because we are persons, can acknowledge that presence; and that is the first step in prayer.

The Second Step - Gratitude

The second step, it seems to me, is that once we realize what God is to us, what He does for us and how much He loves us, the only decent, and polite, obvious and spontaneous response is not only to say "Yes, You do," but also "Thank You, God my Father, for loving life, being, and a share of your own nature into me. Thank You, Jesus, God the Son and my brother. Thank You God the Holy Spirit, for living on in me." Gratitude is an obvious, spontaneous outflow of being aware of what God is and is doing for us.

As an analogy, if a person is very good to me and unselfish and financially supports me, but I do not know him or realize this, I cannot respond to his goodness and love. But if I find out that my support is coming from him, that many good things that make my life much better are coming from him, personally, uniquely to me, it is one thing when I begin to realize and acknowledge it: "Yes, he does. Yes, you do; and something more when I say: "Thank You."

Do you notice the focus of this response? It is essential for gratitude that there be an awareness of receiving from another. No one opens a door into a strange and dark room where he sees nothing, and begins to converse into the room just in case there might be somebody there. Rather, we are first conscious of someone; we look into someone's eyes; we are assured that if we talk into this microphone, there is a radio audience waiting on our words; or if we look into that camera there is a T.V. audience present; or if we put our words on tape, somebody will listen to them. We speak and respond only to some kind of personal presence.

Prayer is like that. Sometimes in our good and holy desires to communicate with God we "junk-up" our prayer. We begin immediately to make acts of faith, hope or love, of contrition or sorrow; we ask for things or just say something, because, after all, we can't just sit there and let nothing happen; so we do something, we say something! I call this "junking-up" prayer. If we do that before we are really conscious of God being present to us, it is like opening up a dark room and talking because there might be somebody there who might just possibly be listening. It is important that we take time peacefully and quietly (even if we have only a few minutes to pray) first to make ourselves aware of the loving, creative, sustaining, divinizing presence of God, because prayer is a personal response to God's presence.

Third Step - A Loving Response

The first step then, is to acknowledge God's presence; the second is to thank Him. The third is a loving response. A person responds to love freely given by saying, "I love you, too." When we say this to God it implies that we first become aware that He first loves us. To say, "God my Father, Christ my Brother, God my Holy Spirit, I love You, too," is our response at its best.

With regard to asking God for favors, I hope we don't misunderstand it as imperfect prayer. When we beg God for sunny weather, or pray that our bursitis will go away, or pray for something more holy or important such as international peace and justice we pay a great compliment to God. This is an expression of "becoming as little children" which Jesus recommended, and honored. A child who comes to his parents and asks for things is paying them a big compliment. What is the child saying but, "You are good and can fill my needs. Please, may I have a candy bar?"

When we approach God with this sense of our absolute dependence, and need, we are conscious of being precious and important, but without Him of being nothing, because all that we have is loved into us by God. In this consciousness, we are profoundly acknowledging what He is and what we are. Did not Jesus Himself say "When you pray, face God and say Abba, (Hebrew baby talk for Papa or Daddy) give us this day our daily bread, forgive us our offenses, lead us not into temptation, deliver us from evil." Notice how much of the "Our Father" is petition. Our Lord teaches us to pray this way. If the prayer of petition is made correctly, it says "God, you are everything: Creator, Sustainer, Divinizer, Forgiver, Merciful Lord of the Universe, Provident God of all, and I belong completely to You." When we pray for any favor we mean, of course, "Thy will be done." We are not trying to blackmail or fool God into giving us something by groveling in His presence. No, we presuppose "Thy will be done" ...but we still would like to have a sunny day tomorrow, etc.

Difficulties in Permitting God to Communicate Himself

To return to an earlier point: what God does is more important than what we do. And God longs to communicate Himself to us. The tragedy is that so few of us permit God to communicate Himself to us in prayer. One reason for this failure is faulty teaching or education in prayer. A second is a lack of trust or faith that He really wants to and is going to communicate Himself personally and uniquely to us. Since we feel uncertain about this, we do most or all of the talking or meditating, or we fill in the time with spiritual reading or something "profitable"; but we are reluctant to empty ourselves and abandon ourselves to His presence and movements so that in silence He can communicate Himself to us the way he prefers.

A third reason is that we are afraid of failing, afraid of trying this kind of prayer and finding out that it doesn't work for us. It will always work, if we remove obstacles and give God a chance, because God longs to communicate Himself to each of us personally. He wants to make our prayer more and more mystical. And this is not in any dangerous, quietistic, way-out, extraordinary sense. God wants us to be normal, ordinary, everyday healthy mystics. By mystic, I mean the sort of person who opens up to God's presence, who lets God fill his consciousness with His presence. The older we grow in our prayer life, the more aware, sensitive, attuned, docile, responsive to God's presence we become; because all genuine prayer is a personal response to that presence.

We have developed or been given two different kinds of capacities or facilities with which to respond or act socially or otherwise. One set of habits we call virtues. These are active capacities; they enable us to do things, and through our activity we perfect these habits. They are acquired by activity; sometimes the beginnings of them are infused, but at least they can be perfected and made stronger by exercise and they render our virtuous activity easier.

They are the "can-do" of our operating capacities, and are very important. But there are also capacities loved into us by God which enable us to be receptive. A radio station not only has a transmitter, but it also has a receiver; they are both important. These receptive capacities become more and more important in our prayer life. They are called gifts of the Holy Spirit. They make us aware, and receptive, attuned, sensitive, responsive, docile to God's communicating presence; and He wants us to pray more and more that way.

Final Reminder

All growth in prayer, then, is rooted in our conviction that God is present to us, that His presence is personal, loving and provident, uniquely saturating us; that God is and wants more and more to be our Father and that like every good father, God wants to speak and communicate with us. He keeps trying to speak to us through all the experiences of our life, through his Church, through His living word in Holy Scripture, through His Eternal Word Jesus Christ, in whose Holy Spirit we are invited to be sons and daughters. God, I repeat, longs to communicate Himself to us and He invites us to listen and to receive. But He will not force this on us.