

What Prayer Is

The following Chapter is from *Opening to God* by Thomas H. Green, S.J.

For the past several years, I have been a spiritual director in a major seminary. The spiritual director's job is a unique one for which there seems to be no real training except experience. He is a curious mix: an *alter ego*, or other self, sharing with young people what is most precious and most private to them -- their own inner selves; he is something of a guru, from whom they hope to learn their secret mantra; he is a strong shoulder in their troubled times and a sounding board for their hopes and plans. In all this, it seems to me, the spiritual director is above all a listener. The hardest thing he has to learn is truly to listen, not passively but creatively and responsively.

The importance, and difficulty, of listening were brought home forcefully to me on one occasion. A fine seminarian was beginning a directed retreat. He was somewhat quiet, and I, in my usual style, wanted to put him at ease and draw him out. When we met in the evening to discuss how the first day had gone, I began to ask him about his experience. He cut me short by saying: "Before we start, I'd like to ask one favor." "What is that?" I asked. He said: "Whenever you start talking, I get nervous and forget what I wanted to say. So please don't say anything until I have finished sharing what I want to share." For the next several days I successfully (heroically!) held my tongue -- and since then I have found that, for me, talker that I am, learning to listen well has demanded much personal discipline.

As I reflect on those years of learning to listen, I realize that the very effort to do so has taught me more about prayer than any other aspect of my priestly ministry -- both because the art of listening seems to me to be at the very heart of prayer, and because prayer itself has been the central topic which the seminarians have wanted to talk about. There are many problems which arise: family, studies, vocation, celibacy, community. But the continually recurring theme in our conversations is prayer. The basic question is: Just what is prayer? We can't really talk about how to do it unless we have some definite idea of what it is.

Those of us who are old enough to have been raised on the Baltimore Catechism (and its counterparts) learned early in life to define prayer as a lifting of the mind and heart to God. This was an easy definition to memorize -- clear and brief. It was a good definition in that it taught us that (1) God is far beyond our ordinary experience; (2) prayer entails effort on our part; and (3) prayer involves both the mind and the heart -- the understanding and the feelings and will -- of man. If we explore these three elements of the catechism definition a little further, perhaps we can come to a clearer picture of just what prayer should be.

The last point -- the place of the heart in prayer -- is an important one, and one that has not always been so clear. For many of the desert fathers and theologians of the early Church, perhaps largely under the influence of Greek philosophy, prayer was primarily a matter of the understanding, of

knowledge. As such it was very much like theology, which sought to place reason at the service of faith -- to use reason to understand and clarify the divine revelation. The theologian and the pray-er differed not so much in what they did -- both were knowers -- as in the means they used to achieve knowledge. The theologian employed his *natural* faculties of reason and reflection, while the pray-er, in this early tradition, employed esoteric or secret techniques which were supposed to lead to a privileged, supernatural, "mystical" way of knowing God and understanding ultimate reality.

This view of prayer and spirituality was condemned by the Church as heretical very early in her history. Its major defect, however, was not its stress on the understanding to the relative neglect of the heart.(1) The really fatal flaw in these early theories of prayer pertained more to the second of the three points we noted above, namely that prayer entails effort on our part. It was condemned because of its excessive reliance on man's own efforts. In the partisan terminology of the times, it was found to be "Pelagian" or "semi-Pelagian," i.e., to follow the theologian Pelagius in overestimating man's ability to encounter God by his own efforts and to neglect the absolute primacy of God's grace. There is an infinite chasm between God and man; man, no matter how hard he tries, cannot come to God -- cannot leap across infinity.(2) He cannot even, as the semi-Pelagians maintained, take the first step in coming to God. God must come to man. He alone can leap the infinite gulf between creator and creature; this is what he did in the Incarnation of Jesus and what he does in the life of every pray-er who truly encounters him.

Although it is easy enough to label this idea semi-Pelagian, and thus to relegate it to the dustbin of history, I am afraid the real situation is not as simple as that. As I look at my own years of learning to pray, it seems clear that there was a good bit of the semi-Pelagian in me, too. The structures within which I was formed as a religious tended to reinforce this stress on a "pulling-myself-up-by-my-bootstraps" kind of spirituality. The format of our novitiate times of prayer (about which I will have some positive things to say later) was rigidly prescribed. Point books provided structured meditations; some 60 of us novices meditated in one room; the one acceptable posture was kneeling. If someone was not kneeling during prayer, he could expect a summons from the director of novices and an inquiry whether he was ill. I quaked through a few of these encounters myself; at the time, while I dreaded them, I came to see them as developing manliness and self-discipline. Later I came to resent the regimentation they implied. Later still, when I myself began to direct souls, I realized that these practices were all part of a widespread spirit of an age:(3) asceticism, self-denial, killing one's own will and desires were, in a sense, at the very core of spirituality. It was as if Jesus' mysterious saying "Since John the Baptist came, up to this present time, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence and the violent are taking it by storm" (Mt 11:12) had been appropriated, alone and out of context, as the basis for a whole spirituality.

The fruit of the semi-Pelagian controversy has been to make us realize that our own effort is utterly secondary to the work of God in our encounter with him. Yet I have felt for some time that this is still a defect in the catechism definition of prayer with which we began this chapter. The idea of raising our minds and hearts to God still seems to imply that prayer is largely a matter of our own efforts -- that God is simply there, while we, in prayer, find ways and means to pull ourselves up to him. Such a view

would obviously be semi-Pelagian, and hence unacceptable to the Christian.

Since Christians have recently shown much interest in Yoga and Zen and their derivatives, it is worth noting in this context that such a view (i.e., that prayer is totally, or largely, a matter of our own efforts) does find considerable support in the great Oriental religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. In those Oriental traditions which do not know a personal God, prayer depends totally on the effort of the pray-er -- even if that effort is, paradoxically enough for the Westerner, wholly devoted to emptying the mind, to coming to quiet, to passivity. It is important to note, however, that even in the mainstream Oriental traditions -- and particularly in the classical literature of Hinduism -- there are affirmations of the personality of God and intimations of a doctrine of grace. In *The Bhagavad Gita*, "the Blessed One" says of his true disciples:

To them, constantly disciplined,
Revering Me with love,
I give that discipline of mind,
Whereby they go unto Me.(4)

There has been some dispute within Hinduism about the literal meaning of texts like these.(5) But for us Christians, there can be no doubt: God is a person (in fact, three Persons!), and prayer is a personal encounter with him. More than that, it is an encounter which depends almost entirely on his grace, since he is God.

This is not the place to attempt to explain to the puzzled Christian what exactly lies at the end of the road of prayer for the Hindu or Buddhist contemplative. My point is simply that Christian prayer is grounded in a very specific conception of God: a personal God who encounters his creatures in love. To return to the catechism definition, the idea of prayer as a raising of our minds and hearts to God seems to me to over stress our own effort and activity in prayer. For some time, I have been suggesting that a better approach would be to define prayer as an *opening* of the mind and heart to God. This seems better because the idea of opening stresses receptivity, responsiveness to another. To open to another is to act, but it is to act in such a way that the other remains the dominant partner.

Perhaps the clearest example of openness is the art of listening, which we discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Listening is indeed a real art, which some people never learn. We all have experienced people who cannot or do not listen. They hear but do not understand; their bodily ears pick up sound, but their hearts are not attentive to its meaning. You can talk *to* them, but you can scarcely talk *with* them. Yahweh uses this image of hearing and yet not hearing to express his frustration with Israel: "Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but see not, who have ears, but hear not" (Jer 5:21); and Jesus uses it to the same effect when speaking of his own "hearers" after the multiplication of the loaves: "Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember?" Mk 8:17-18).

Hearing or listening is a good metaphor for prayer. The good pray-er is above all a good listener.

Prayer is dialogue; it is a personal encounter in love. When we communicate with someone we care about, we speak and we listen. But even our speaking is responsive: What we say depends upon what the other person has said to us. Otherwise we don't have real dialogue, but rather two monologues running along side by side.

I believe that our remarks have carried us a good way toward understanding what prayer is. In the past we have catalogued prayer under four headings: adoration, contrition, thanksgiving and supplication (or petition) -- easy to remember because the initial letters spell "acts." This is helpful in that it makes clear that there is much more to prayer than merely asking for things (supplication). But we have seen that we need to go deeper than "acts" of our own to get to the real meaning of prayer. Prayer is essentially a dialogic encounter between God and man; and since God is Lord, he alone can initiate the encounter. This is the important implication of the first element of our catechism definition. Hence what man does or says in prayer will depend on what God does or says first. Here, above all, it is true that "You have not chosen me; I have chosen you" (Jn 15:16). God's choice, his call, is fundamental and all-important.

At the same time, prayer is a dialogue, an encounter between two persons. What man does or says is an integral part of prayer, since even God cannot speak *with* us unless we also speak. Even God cannot dialogue with a man who is interiorly deaf and mute. This was the second element of value in our catechism definition: Prayer does entail effort on the part of man, even though it is always God who reaches across infinity to us, and even though man's effort is itself impossible without the sustaining grace of God.

Moreover, as the third element of the catechism definition made clear, man's response involves both his head and his heart. The understanding plays an important role in prayer, since man cannot love what he does not know. His love is proportioned to his knowledge. At the same time, prayer is not mere reasoning or speculation about God. As Teresa of Avila says in the *Interior Castle*, "The important thing (in prayer) is not to think much but to love much." (6) The goal of prayer is the encounter with God in love. And love, as Teresa goes on to say "consists, not in the extent of our happiness, but in the firmness of our determination to try to please God in everything." Thus prayer involves the heart and will of man, even more fundamentally than his understanding.

It was St. Augustine, one of the greatest intellects the Church has produced, who said "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." (7) For the learned man fulfillment may lie in the mind's coming to rest, but for the pray-er, the lover, it is the heart that matters most.

In this connection, it is important to note that *spontaneity* is of the very essence of prayer, as it is of all dialogue. Augustine's "heart" is a spontaneous organ, responding to the sacrament of the present moment. Its responses cannot be programmed, because we cannot know in advance the word which God will speak to us at any given moment. When we were novices we were encouraged to plan our conversations for recreation -- presumably so that the topics discussed would be fruitful and uplifting. The result, of course, was some very stifled conversations -- and some very funny, though frustrating, encounters where each participant labored mightily to steer the talk to his own planned area. Since then

I have heard the same thing at social events and cocktail parties, with the same ludicrous results. In the novitiate the intention was good, but the loss in spontaneity was disastrous. The same thing will be true in a programmed approach to prayer.

To the beginner, there is still a puzzle and a mystery in listening to God. (To the proficient pray-er it is no longer a puzzle, but it will always be a mystery.) Since we never encounter God in the same way we encounter another human being, how do we know when God talks? How do we interpret what he "says" when he does not speak as men speak? How can I respond meaningfully to someone whose coming is always veiled in the mystery of faith? In short, how do I know I am not just talking to myself when I pray? The central purpose of this book is to help to answer these questions -- not in a way that will eliminate the mystery of faith, but in a way that will encourage the beginner to begin and to continue to discover God speaking in his or her own life.

We have based our explanation of what prayer is on the human experience of dialogue and listening. I think we will see, in the chapters that follow, that our ordinary human experience of love and dialogue -- whether between husband and wife, between director and directee, or between friend and friend -- can help us a great deal to discover and interpret our experience of prayer as a personal encounter in love between God and man.

Footnotes

- (1) Almost a thousand years later St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest pray-ers and greatest theologians in the history of the Church, would still be very much in the intellectualist tradition (i.e., emphasizing man's understanding in prayer). And 300 years later still Martin Luther would react against a predominantly intellectualist Catholic view of faith. It is true that a one-sided, exclusive stress on the understanding would be rare after the fifth century. But, despite the Franciscan emphasis on the will and on love, the primacy of man's intellect or understanding had a long history; and it is probably no exaggeration to say that the Catholic tradition of prayer is much indebted to Luther and the great Protestant thinkers who followed him -- as much as to any human agency -- for the emphasis on the heart in recent centuries. Luther, in turn, felt greatly indebted to the spiritual theology of St. Bernard of Clairvaux.
- (2) This was the first of the three elements we noted in the catechism definition of prayer.
- (3) The pendulum has swung very far to the other side in just 20 years, and the catchwords have now become "self-expression," "personal fulfillment," "doing my own thing." Since this extreme is even more harmful to a solid spirituality, we shall have to discuss, in Chapter 5, the positive value of asceticism in any genuine interior life. What we seek, throughout the book, is a balance between God's work and man's -- a dialogue between grace and personal initiative.
- (4) The *Bhagavad Gita*, translated by Franklin Edgerton, Chapter X, stanza 10 (p.51). Harvard University paperback, 1972.
- (5) See, for example, K. M. Sen, *Hinduism* (Pelican paperbacks, 1970), pp.20, 74, 91.
- (6) *The Fourth Mansions*, Chapter One (volume II, p. 233 in the translation by B. Allison Peers of *The Complete Works of St. Teresa of Jesus*, Sheed and Ward, 1946).
- (7) *Confessions of St. Augustine*, Book I, Chapter 1, trans. Frank Sheed (Sheed and Ward, 1943) p.3.