

CONFERENCE SIX

PRAYER: A PARTICIPATION IN THE DIVINE LIFE

The breathing we did yesterday will not help us today. We have to breathe every day. And so, too, we need to pray every day. We priests know this. We also know that the greatest prayer is the Eucharist by which we give thanksgiving to the Father through His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and in which we pray for all the needs of the Church, of society, and of those who are dear to us. The celebration of Mass is our tremendous privilege. Next to the Mass and prolonging it, is the divine office. By spreading this through our day we sanctify our day and move towards the unceasing prayer that St. Paul urges every Christian to make.

Now admittedly, the divine office may at times seem like drudgery. We are not always in the same state. Our pastoral duties can fray our emotions, and we may not be in a condition conducive to prayer. But prayer is all the more needed then to help us to pull ourselves together in recollection and attention to the Beloved. The divine office may at such times be truly a sacrifice of praise, with the emphasis on sacrifice. We must remember that we are not praying to gratify ourselves but to please Jesus, our Beloved. Praying in dryness and distractedness may not be pleasant for us, but may be delightful to the Lord.

St. Paul says that the priest is a mediator between God and man in the things that pertain to God. The priest must, before all else, be an example of a human being, a man. The moral virtues with the theological virtues, as we have said, are what perfect a human person as a human being. Therefore, the priest must above all else practice these virtues, and also teach them. This is what renews the priesthood and what renews society. This is what attracts vocations and makes for a serene, happy, attractive person in whom and through whom Christ lives. Now human beings owe God, their supreme Benefactor, praise, thanksgiving, adoration, supplication, and repentance. And the priest, above all as the mediator between God and man in the things that pertain to God, discharges lovingly and joyfully this office. He does so with his entire life, lived in fellowship with the Holy Spirit and with his fellow human beings, including his friends and those whom he is serving. But he does so in a special manner, through the Eucharist and the divine office. These give God the praise and thanksgiving due Him, the supplication for the needs of humanity, and the repentance for sins. The priest prays especially for those dear to him, for those whom he serves, but he also prays as a representative of the human family for all its members till the end of time. The psalms are uniquely expressive of the sentiments that the priest is called to have and of the acts he is called to make. The priest is a representative in his prayer, including his private prayer, of not only the human family but also of the Church, the bride of Christ.

Prayer is life. It is a participation in the divine life. Prayer infuses in us the strength to practice all the virtues, theological and moral, which perfect us as men, and it infuses in us the strength to avoid all sins. If we persevere in prayer we will persevere in our vocation. Falling away from the priesthood begins with the neglect of prayer and of spiritual reading. If we find this is happening to us, we must return to prayer and spiritual reading. Spiritual reading done regularly is sweet. Neglected, it becomes difficult. Not

Formation of the Priest -- Raphael Simon, OCSO, MD

every book will bring about a breakthrough in our spiritual life. But if we do spiritual reading regularly, we will from time to time come to a book that does.

The fervor with which we celebrate Mass and the divine office will depend on the dispositions which we bring to these acts through the prayer we make privately, when we enter our own room and shut the door as Jesus advises us to do. Not that the place of prayer has to be in our room – other things being equal it is best made before the Blessed Sacrament.

Our private prayer is powerful for the Church and for the public. The dispositions that flow from our prayer make us more devoted in our activities as priests. Our love is deepened, and we proceed in our daily duties more faithfully and in unison with Jesus Christ.

Just as the divine persons are within each other, so prayer united to the other parts of the spiritual program, leads our hearts to be one with each other and one with the heart of Jesus. That is because the more we are united with Jesus the more we are united with others and vice versa. The spiritual program frees us from what hinders this union. This is the union that Jesus prayed for in His priestly prayer, “That they may be one, Father, as we are one, that they may be one in us.” It is by our purified faith, hope, and love which lead us to conform our wills with the divine will, that we are one, joint partakers of the divinity (2Peter 1:4).

The divine office itself contains beautiful prayers which nourish us, prayers of praise, thanksgiving, supplication, contrition, a-c-t-s: adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication. These acts can help us in the dry and distracted moments of our mental prayer. They join our souls to God. Reflection that does not elicit acts of the will is not yet prayer. By reflection we can think of the majesty of Jesus Christ, sitting at the right hand of the Father, we can thereby provide our wills with motives for adoring Jesus Christ, for loving Him, for submitting to Him, for belonging wholly and entirely to Him. But it is the act of the will which unites us to Him, just as in sewing, it is the thread which unites two pieces of cloth. We need to use a needle to pass thread through the cloth, and in this case, the needle is our reflections. They make it possible for us to elicit acts of the will.

In mental prayer, we can remain in one act as long as we wish, and then make reflections on our needs, which allow us then to make acts of supplication, or on our sins which lead us into contrition, or on the benefits we daily receive which incite acts of thanksgiving. It might be that we remain in one or two of these acts throughout our prayer time. These acts reflect our various relationships to God. Adoration reflects our condition as His creatures, contrition our relation to Him as our Redeemer, thanksgiving our relation to Him as our Benefactor, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. The interaction of the intellect enlightened by faith and the will produce prayer.

This is a way of praying in dryness in the desert. In times when we are on the mountaintop, we may simply remain absorbed in God without any discrete or discursive acts. When this absorption wanes, we can simply pick up a prayer word, like “Jesus,” or an invocation like “Jesus, I love you,” putting fuel on the fire as St. Teresa advises. In fact, we may feel drawn to this type of prayer of just being in the presence of the Beloved without words and without experiencing anything at other times.

St. Teresa of Avila defines prayer as conversation with God. Those who love each other desire to be in the other’s presence, and they desire to converse. By conversing they

Prayer: A Participation in the Divine Life

come to know each other better. If we are doing solid spiritual reading, it will lead us into a better knowledge of Christ and then we will desire to return to His presence during the course of our activities, and to speak with Him about them. We draw from Him strength in our weariness, light in our perplexities, assurance in our doubts, and we offer Him our activities and words in praise of Him, just as a lover will praise the Beloved. Striking examples are the *Song of Songs* and the Psalms. Dom John Chapman, the English Benedictine scripture scholar, gave us an important instruction on prayer, “Pray as you can, and not as you can’t.”

While kneeling can be a great help to prayer, sitting may help us too. A chair, in which we sit erect, supported by the back, and sitting evenly on our haunches, avoids discomfort from being a distraction to our prayer or causing us to shorten it. Harried as we are in our complex society, less than half an hour may not be enough to clear the commotion from our hearts. Longer prayer when circumstances permit becomes more fruitful. But a half-hour twice a day or half an hour in the morning and twenty minutes later in the day is very helpful. Once a month having a day of recollection in which we relax and spend our time with God may be very refreshing and renew our perspective and orientation. This will help us to know what is going on in our hearts and lives and give the Holy Spirit an opportunity to guide us. Actually much may be going on that we are not willing to admit or to evaluate in the light of our conscience. Without an effort our consciences can become clogged by rationalizations, justifications, excuses. Sin can enter our lives stealthily and be unrecognized.

If we look back over our lives and vocation, we may identify an early period of conversion leading to our vocation, to the call to the priesthood, when we were always thinking of God and when prayer was easy and satisfying. This is the honeymoon stage. Then the bottom seemed to drop out. We found it difficult to pray, to make discursive acts, yet we were drawn to think of God and to continue to order our days to please Him. In the honeymoon stage we felt that another push and we would be in Heaven, we would be saints. In the stage where the bottom has dropped out, we feel another push and we will be in Hell. This is a new stage of prayer, and in it we are now in touch with the native tendencies of our temperament – our tendencies to anger, sadness, lust, whatever. Now if this is not the result of waywardness on our part, a search for unhealthy outlets, or due to a depression, it is a new stage which leads to a more simple form of prayer, which we may still be experiencing. Then the saying of the Old Testament applies: Be still and see that I am God. It is a prayer of quiet and the peace increases as we pursue this inner quietness. Here we remain in His presence without experiencing anything. When this prayer is genuine, it imparts secretly to our will a readiness to fulfill all the duties of our state of life promptly and conscientiously.

Because of our activities, when we enter into ourselves we may find a disaster area. And the longer we remain in this prayer of quiet the more the commotion may increase. But this is good. We are entering more deeply into ourselves. And while we experience increasing commotion, really the commotion is quieting down. We may appreciate this after we emerge from prayer.

The early period of discursive meditative prayer lays a foundation of convictions about Jesus and His teachings which help us to put our life in order, eliminating what hinders our union with Him. When we are drawn from this discursive meditation to simplified prayer, centering prayer may be helpful. Centering prayer, based on *The Cloud*

of Unknowing by an anonymous fourteenth century author, is the use of a prayer word that expresses our faith and love in response to the presence of Jesus. We use this prayer word which may be the name of Jesus, as much as necessary to keep in His presence. When we realize that our mind has wandered, we quietly bring it back by picking up our prayer word.

Simplified prayer, because it does not give room for the emotions, leads to a deep refreshment, of which we may not be conscious because it leads us more deeply within where there may be some commotion, and also because it may be riddled with distractions. We let these distracting thoughts pass without becoming involved with them. There is no other aim in simplified prayer than to remain in the presence of God, and the only way we can discern whether our prayer is genuine and fruitful is by noting whether our behavior over time is changing for the better.

Simplified prayer may continue for years, sometimes relieved by sensible consolations which encourage us, sometimes burdened by deepening feelings of alienation from God. This is the experience that made the Cure of Ars run away from his very fruitful apostolate as a parish priest twice to attempt to become a Trappist. Drawing 80,000 people a year to his little confessional in out-of-the-way rural Ars, he was asked if he was not tempted to pride. He replied, "No, I am tempted to despair." This simple type of prayer does not puff us up as might apparitions, locutions, or visions.

We might remark that extraordinary phenomena such as locutions, visions, and revelations do not necessarily sanctify, and are not to be sought. Seeking them might open the soul to the delusions of Satan. While these are called mystical phenomena, simplified prayer and infused prayer are a mysticism that is in the ordinary way of sanctification. This mysticism, an experience of God in faith, comes through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the sanctifying gifts of wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, etc. which are much more important and desirable than the charismatic gifts such as revelations, prophecy, locutions and tongues. In fact, the charismatic gifts cannot be used in a way profitable for the soul without the sanctifying gifts. Prophecy, revelation, and locutions are to be authenticated by a priest or bishop, and are not to be despised. The Vatican Council warns that the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit are not to be quenched. This means that there should neither be a bias in favor or against these gifts. The verification of charismatic gifts requires discernment, prayer, and careful consideration.

Our secular mentality and the mentality of our modern sciences, including psychology and psychiatry, are biased against the charismatic gifts which are outside their ken and competence. But this does not stop these professionals from offering opinions. Now of course, in the case of these extraordinary phenomena, the opinions of psychologists and psychiatrists on the presence or absence of pathology is of primary importance. But beyond that psychologists and psychiatrists cannot go without going outside their field of expertise.

It is important in judging these matters to see whether there is a correspondence between these phenomena on the one hand, and Scripture and the teaching of the Church on the other. God is not a contradiction, and does not contradict Himself. It is important to see if the persons having these experiences are well-balanced psychologically and emotionally and of good character. Deception, conscious or unconscious, can lurk in

Prayer: A Participation in the Divine Life

these matters. St. Paul speaks of seeking the better of the charismatic gifts, particularly prophecy, but then adds he will show a better way, namely the way of charity.

Charismatic prayer is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Charismatic prayer groups may be helpful, but charismatic prayer should lead to times of entering into oneself to find God within in quietness. Those involved in the charismatic prayer movement should remember that charity is the highest gift and pray above all else for this gift, and practice it, together with obedience to the Church and integration into the life of the Church. The “Life in the Spirit” seminars should emphasize above all else prayer for charity. Cardinal Suenens, who was the liaison between the charismatic movement and the Church, commended my book *Hammer and Fire*³ in a prefatory note, particularly for its reminder that charity is the highest gift.

It is helpful to identify the stages of prayer in our own life and in the lives of those who come to us for help and direction. It is only by being a man of prayer that we will be equipped to understand souls and give them direction. Such understanding and direction may be the source of priestly or religious vocations. But in other cases, the Holy Spirit is drawing a lay person, married or single, to holiness in their present state of life, and they need the encouragement of a priest. Our spiritual reading, through which we absorb and interiorize in prayer the principles of the spiritual life, is important too in equipping us for understanding souls. Our spiritual reading should, however, not be directed to this, but to our own union with Christ. Just as a prism will concentrate the rays of the sun on a piece of paper to make it burst into flames, so if we direct our spiritual reading to our own sanctification, our soul will catch fire, and when we give guidance to others, it will come not from the head alone, but from the heart. Hearers are moved when the priest speaks from the heart. What he derives from theological study may go right over the heads of the people. We must direct our word with simplicity from hearts that are in love with the Lord, if we wish to move our hearers to union with Him.



All Rights Reserved
© Raphael Simon OCSO, July 1999
Published by permission of the Abbot of St. Joseph's Abbey

³ Simon, Raphael. *Hammer and Fire: Way to Contemplative Happiness and Mental Health in Accordance with the Judeo-Christian Tradition*. Bethesda: Zaccheus Press, 2006. [This is a revised edition of the Saint Bede's publication of 1987. Ed.]