

The Parish Priest  
and  
The Life of Prayer

by Evelyn Underhill

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## THE PRIEST'S LIFE OF PRAYER

**I**T SEEMS presumptuous for any one, and especially a member of the laity, to attempt to add to that which has already been said and written upon the spiritual life of the Christian priest. Only the overwhelming importance of the subject for the work of the Church, and the fact that in the pressure of outward life we need again and again to be reminded of those unchanging realities of the inward life which alone give any value to our active work can justify this. But these certain truths are surely sufficient reason for considering once again the special nature of the priest's life of prayer; what it means, what it is for, and why it matters so much. It is true, of course, that in thinking of prayer we must guard against the inclination to regard it chiefly as a way of getting strength and help; a making use of God. Nevertheless, it is for the priest the unique source of pastoral power. Other things—intellectual and social aptitudes, good preaching, a capacity for organization—help his work, and help much. None of these, however, is essential. Prayer is. The man whose life is coloured by prayer, whose loving communion with God comes first, will always win souls; because he shows them in his own life and person the attractiveness of reality, the demand, the transforming power of the spiritual life. His intellectual powers and the rest will not, comparatively speaking, matter much. The point is that he stands as a witness to that which he proclaims. The most persuasive preacher, the most devoted and untiring social worker, the most up-to-date theologian—unless loving devotion to God exceeds and enfolds these activities—will not win souls.

It follows from this, that the priest's life of prayer, his communion with God, is not only his primary obligation to the Church; it is also the only condition under which the work of the Christian ministry can be properly done. He is called, as the Book of Wisdom says, to be a 'friend of God, and prophet': and will only be a

good prophet in so far as he is really a friend of God. For his business is to lead men out towards eternity; and how can he do this, unless it is a country in which he is at home? He is required to represent the peace of God in a troubled society; but that is impossible, if he has not the habit of resorting to those deeps of the spirit where His Presence dwells.

We all know this; but it is desperately hard to keep our grasp of it, and go on putting it into practical effect. Everything in modern life, and perhaps especially in the life of the parish clergy, tends to make it more difficult. For the first thing that occurs to us is, that the mandate of Christ's minister is to feed and cherish His sheep, to give his life for that; and in most cases this is, and in all cases it can be, a full-time job. The demands on the time, interest, kindness, patience, and energy of the faithful priest are constant, and must be met; for his model is One Who serveth. So the determined setting aside, and holding against all comers as a first charge, of a substantial daily time for communion with God, might not in his case be justified if it were only done for the sake of his own soul. But it has a far greater sanction than that; and perhaps it will clear the real issue, if we state this at once in the strongest terms. A priest's life of prayer is, in a peculiar sense, part of the great mystery of the Incarnation. He is meant to be one of the channels by and through which the Eternal God, manifested in time, acts within the human world; reaches out, seeks, touches, and transforms human souls. His real position in the parish is that of a dedicated agent of the Divine Love. The Spirit of Christ, indwelling His Church, is to act through him.

It is true that God's freedom is absolute, and that He can and does act through all sorts of people, in all sorts of ways. But the priest has specially offered himself for this. Can any one hope to fill such a position, unless his relation to God, his confident communion, and perpetual self-offering, is the first and most real thing in his life? He must be a living part of the Praying Church, take his full share in the life of the Praying Church, be woven into her eternal act of adoration, if his work among souls is to be done. He has to bring his people into the Presence of God, to offer in their name the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving; and these are great and realistic spiritual actions, which demand in those who perform them a vivid spiritual life, and constant resort to spiritual food. If those who

are set apart for this purpose do not put the supernatural first, no one else is likely to do so. And if in practice this is difficult, and means a tiresome wrench and readjustment of daily habits, God can never be adequately served or truly known except by the path of sacrifice.

Of course it is true that the direct worship of God does not cover the whole of the vocation of the clergy, The Christian minister is ordained to be both deacon and priest; the special character and grace of the diaconate is not obliterated when he receives the great privileges of the priesthood. He is still one of those called to serve the brethren, as well as to go up to the altar of God: and it is that double vocation, turned towards the Eternal and towards the human—love of God and love of souls—which makes the tension and richness of the priest's life, and must be reflected in his prayer. For him, at any rate, the disciplined and faithful cultivation of the inner life, the deepening of spiritual sensitiveness, can never be a self-regarding task: it is the very condition of his effectiveness.

All this means the maintenance of a right balance between the visible and invisible, active and contemplative sides of the religious vocation: adherence to God in prayer, and because of that adherence, supported and fed by it, a creative, cherishing, patient, redeeming love and service poured out to men.

When we come down from principles to practice, the demand on the strength and time of the parish priest is often so great, that it seems as though this exclusive attention given to God is only to be had at the expense of time and attention which are needed by his people; that here, solitary communion with God is in the nature of a spiritual self-indulgence, and that detailed response to the demands and needs of the flock must always be nearer to the mind of Christ. But surely Christian history steadily contradicts that view. It is always the priest whose life of prayer is deep and strong, and a first charge on his time, whose work for God and souls is also deep and strong; who is ready for the self-forgetful labour and constant sacrifice which it requires. The vocation of the Christian minister is a supernatural vocation; and how can he fulfil it, unless he lives a supernatural life? Much is now being said about evangelism; but before we get effective evangelism, we have to get effective evangelists. Evangelism is useless, unless it is the work of one

devoted to God, willing and glad to suffer all things for God, penetrated by the attractiveness of God. New machinery, adaptations and adjustments, are not the first need of the Church of England; but more devoted, adoring, sacrificial souls. These are supernatural qualities, given by God in our hours of direct attention to Him; and these are the only lasting source of that charity, that invincible lovingkindness which will help us to show the beauty of Christ to others and so win them for God. It is terribly hard for human beings to believe this, believe it enough to carry it out; but those who do carry it out have no doubt of its truth.

Consider the Curé d'Ars, the pattern and patron saint of parish priests. There was a man of very humble origins, of very limited intellectual power, and with the minimum of education needed for his career; but with the maximum of devotedness. From the human point of view, this was his total equipment. At a very difficult moment in the history of the French Church, he was sent to a particularly hopeless village, where religion and morals had gone to seed; and there he spent his whole life. No preferment, no external help either spiritual or material, no apparent scope. Yet bit by bit, as his spiritual power developed, and the strange magnetism of a living Christianity was felt, this poor, obscure peasant priest became the conscience of France, the determining influence in thousands of lives. His church was a place of pilgrimage for a multitude of troubled souls from every part of the country. There was no reason for this except the power of God, acting through a loving and abandoned soul transformed by prayer. Not many clergy would care to tackle his average working day. The number of hours which he spent in pastoral work, or in his church—either in worship, or in ministering to those who came to him—often amounted to sixteen out of the twenty-four. So long as any one needed him, he just went on and on. But this intimidating programme, and this untiring love and care for souls, still left time for that which made it possible; the deep personal life of prayer, self-offering, communion, supplication—loving, realistic, confident intercourse with God.

Again, come to an example from our own times and our own Church: the career of Father Wainright of St. Peter's, London Docks. Fifty years in one parish; which was hardly civilized when he came to it, but 'washed by the tears of his people,' as one of them said, when

he died. Fifty years spent not in ministering to the respectable members of the congregation, but in constant devotion to the lost sheep, the drunkard, the degraded, and the criminal; appearing in the middle of the night unasked at the bedside of the dying, and bringing security and peace. We can realize something of the spiritual and the physical demands of such a career as that; the staying power it requires. How was it done? It was done in the strength drawn from a constant communion with God; supported and expressed by the daily Eucharist, and by the hour of absorbed devotion which followed it and which no call was allowed to interrupt. I suppose there are few Christians who would not be thankful to accomplish a tithe of what Father Wainright did for Dockland; but the way in which he did it is the only way in which such work can be done. First the inward and secret life of oblation and adherence to God; and then in its power, the outward life of co-operation with God. To do great things for souls, you must become the agent and channel of a more than human love; and this must be the chief object of a priest's life of prayer. It means a most careful preservation of our Lord's balance between solitary communion with the Father and loving self-spending among men.

We turn from this to strictly practical considerations. Accepting this fact that the Godward life, the prayer of the priest is his first duty, indeed his first necessity: what are the lines on which it can best be developed? His time is limited by his various obligations; even though the first charge on that time be his secret communion with God. Moreover, he shares with all other human beings the humiliating fact that our attention to things of the Spirit cannot be suddenly produced, or sustained beyond a certain point. Even at best it will fluctuate a great deal; and often needs preparation and support. So he is not only limited from outside by his pastoral duties, but also from within by the very facts of our human nature. Therefore his devotional life must be planned with prudence as well as with fervour. Even that quiet, speechless waiting on God, that trustful self-abandonment to His purposes, which is one of the most deeply refreshing of all prayers, is always apt to fall away into wandering thoughts or mere drowsiness if we presume, and try to maintain it too long; or do not feed it wisely by thoughts and by reading which tend to deepen in us the sense of God's greatness and the spirit of

adoring love. Therefore it is well to let the reading and vocal prayer which feed and prepare the times of mental prayer be always about God, and not about men. We should dwell most on the mighty, positive qualities of the Eternal; 'mean God, not His works,' as the mystics say. 'He alone matters, He alone is.' The priest, so beset by the problems and needs of men, should frequent in his reading the society of those who know this, and try to catch something of their spaciousness of mind, their deep realism, their devoted love: should let God flood his life, and then, in His light and power, confront the problems of that life.

Again, there are days for every one when the forms of our prayer become dead, tasteless, and unreal to us; sometimes indeed almost repugnant. The offices are dreary and meaningless; and we can produce nothing of our own, and do not want to produce anything of our own. Our ceiling, as airmen say, is low. No one escapes this experience; and the character of his life, his constant pre-occupation with religion, must keep the priest specially exposed to it, and make it specially painful in his case. For whatever he may feel, or not feel, he must still try to present religion in its freshness and attraction—even though it seems stale, unattractive, unreal—deliberately discounting his own misfortunes and practising the most searching self-oblivion at the very heart of his spiritual life.

All this means that the prayer of the priest must never be allowed to become too individualistic and subjective. He needs the constant support which is given by remembrance of his corporate situation, as a member of the one supra-personal Praying Church; the constant sense that the prayer of that great Church goes on, and we, whatever our feelings or our failings, are an integral part of her life. *She* offers the one sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. We sink our small lives and small spiritual efforts in that great worshipping life; carrying on, as faithful members of that Body, through the periods of spiritual darkness as well as the periods of spiritual light.

Ye that by night stand in the house of the Lord: even in  
the courts of the house of our God,

Lift up your hands in the sanctuary: and praise the Lord.



There is always a night-shift, and sooner or later we shall find ourselves serving on the night-shift; and if our prayer is mainly of the individual and subjective sort, giving too much space to feeling and not enough place to will, it puts us in a very poor position. What we all need then, and the priest I suppose needs very specially, is some link between our own fluctuating communion with God and the great continuous action of the Church; a devotional pattern, a reminder of the vast life of prayer coming out of the past, stretching forward to the future, into which our small prayer is woven; something which shall steady us, transcend our changing feelings, and keep our minds in tune with the Mind of the Church.

The priest, of course, has this pattern laid down for him; a pattern in which all the deepest spiritual truths of Christianity are gathered up and conserved. The great outlines of his life of prayer are already drawn in the Divine Office, which he must recite morning and evening in union with the whole Church, and in the Eucharist, which it is his sacred privilege to celebrate. And in a general sense we may say that it is by deepening and enlarging the dispositions which these great acts of worship demand and foster, that his spiritual life will grow best. If he pours into this mould all that he can of his adoration, his penitence, his self-naughting, and his love, and so makes it—as he can do—the living instrument of his converse with God, he needs nothing more. He is then part of the great life of the Praying Church; and his personal life of prayer, which so easily becomes lonely, thin, and worried, at the mercy of passing moods if cut off from that of the main body, gains dignity and power, for it is offered in and with Christ, by Whose Spirit the Church lives.

Look first, then, at the daily Office, as the material, the ordained vehicle of the priest's daily prayer. What is it? Essentially, it is a beautifully balanced act of pure worship. 'Praise ye the Lord! The Lord's Name be praised!' Its material is nearly all Biblical; so that here Evangelical and Catholic are at one. By far the larger part—the psalms and the canticles—is great Christian poetry, charged with inexhaustible meaning; suggesting far more than it says, and capable of lifting up those who use it rightly, and introducing them into the atmosphere of eternity.

Surely it is a very great thing that twice every day the Christian minister must withdraw his attention from all the details and demands which beset him, feed his prayer by reading and meditation of the Scriptures, and yield to the influence of this sacred poetry—the *Venite, Te Deum, Magnificat*—with its dominant mood of adoring and disinterested delight. What a tragedy that this part of a priest's duty, which can lead him out to the supernatural, and is inexhaustible in its spiritual suggestions, should ever become formal, hurried, unreal! See how the Western Church, from the earliest times, has put the *Venite* at the beginning of the great Office of Matins which opens her daily cycle of prayer; to give straightaway the colour and accent of her worship. All her ministers are required to adore God under this formula every day; to come before His presence with thanksgiving, and show themselves glad in Him with psalms. That is the temper in which the Offices should be said. 'Leave the transitory, seek the Eternal,' says Thomas a Kempis. Twice a day the Divine Office calls us, for our soul's health, to do this. Not the *Miserere* but the *Venite*; not subjective penitence, but objective delight in God. 'O Lord, open Thou my lips; and my mouth shall show forth Thy praise.' We begin with the direct appeal to God as the only cause and author of prayer; take a Bible into our hands, and look confidently up to Him.

The Church of England, in selecting from the Breviary the material for her Morning and Evening Office, seems specially to have desired to emphasize this note of worshipping joy. Every morning, as well as the *Venite* and *Benedictus*, the *Te Deum* or the *Benedicite* is to be said or sung. Those glorious songs, if we mean them, ought to be enough to send Christians off for the day's work in very good spirits; more focussed on God's splendour than on their own difficulties. We all know well enough how hard this temper is to maintain through the tensions and ups and downs of life—anxiety, pressure, disappointment, loneliness, ill health—but how magnificent it is that every day the Church decisively calls her sacred ministers to return to this note of triumph and joy; to contemplate the loveliness of God. 'He whom God pleases, pleases God,' said St. Augustine. There we have in a nutshell the meaning of adoring prayer. And only the priest whom God really pleases, is going to make others really care about God.

So adoration is to stand first in the priest's ordered prayer; and all he says and does is to be coloured by this. In fact, the rhythm and proportion of the Lord's Prayer should be the rhythm and proportion of his whole life of prayer; first God in Himself and his worship of God and relation to God—our Father Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name—then, and only then, our human situation and needs. God in His Holy Perfection, the Father of all Life, already completely present, bathing and penetrating us. 'O come, let us sing unto the Lord!' The prevenience of God and adoration of God are the dominant facts of the life of prayer, and especially of the priest's life of prayer; for such adoration means getting our attitude to Reality right, and keeping it right. It is the essential preparation of all decent action; and especially of all religious and pastoral action. The Christian priest is called to be a fellow-worker with God and a yokefellow with Christ, both pulling at the same cart; and the object of his life of prayer is to keep him fit for this glorious privilege, weld him ever more and more into the organism—the Church—that is working for the triumph of God. It is to set the scene for his penitence, his moral striving and his devotedness—for that deep and intimate conversation, as of one friend with another, which is the cause and support of the consecrated life; and in which we at last learn to say, without any reserves and without counting the cost, 'Thy Will be done.'

'God,' says Paul Claudel, 'keeps up a continual conversation with every creature.' He has a special conversation to maintain with each one of us; and the traditional praise and prayer of the Church, rightly practised, is a wonderful means of tuning us in to it. When the conversation is established, and in the words of Pusey's beautiful prayer we have 'escaped from the weary round of harassing thoughts into His Eternal Presence,' then and only then can we rightly offer our petitions; as in the Divine Office these follow the psalms, canticles, and lessons, that is to say, the adoring and meditative parts of our prayer. Sometimes, it is true, the conversation will be mainly a confession of faults or a disclosure of weakness or depression; but this, too, can be brought into the tranquil presence of God and have its quality changed by contact with His reality. It is this sequence of praise, attention, and prayer which gradually trains us to a complete suppleness in His hand, a total acquiescence in His mysterious

purpose; so that our actions become, more and more, the actions of the Holy Spirit in us. This alone is to be in a true sense a minister of the Gospel; that is, an agent of God's self-expression in the world. Unless the priest's will is thus turned to God—unless God is his magnet, his true centre of interest—his prayers of supplication, for light and strength in his work, for his people and their needs, for sinners, will not be truly alive or truly real.

The daily Offices, then, can and should provide a frame for the priest's daily prayer, with its varied movements of adoration, penitence, meditation on the Word of God, and supplication to God. But all this has reality and worth because of something far deeper—something which involves the very life of the soul—and this deeper life and movement is embodied and expressed in the liturgy of the Eucharist, the great central act of Christian worship.

The rhythm and movement of the Eucharist show forth in a wonderful way the true rhythm and movement of the ministerial life; which is, of course, a part of the great rhythm and movement of the Church's life. That is to say, it is first an offering made to God, an oblation; and a consecration to His purpose of that which is offered—our life. And next, it is a return movement to men, bringing to them the Food of Eternal Life; and a fellowship in the receiving of that gift. For the Eucharistic mystery is the outward and visible expression of that Eucharistic life by and for which the Church exists; a natural life given in its wholeness to God, laid on His altar, like its tokens, the natural elements of bread and wine, and consecrated, transformed by His inpouring life, to be used by Him to give life and food to other souls. And this is surely the essence of the priest's vocation. 'You are the Body of Christ,' said St. Augustine to his communicants. You are meant to be offered as a reasonable and living sacrifice; and so made the vehicles of His self-imparting love. With what great and searching force that saying comes to the priest. Whenever the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she performs her supreme act of worship; and she also celebrates the mystery of her being. A minister of religion is not only a bit of that living Church, but a member specially set apart for this sacred work. That fact, that tremendous vocation, must surely dominate his life of prayer; which must be penetrated by the twin dispositions of total self-offering to God, and of total dependence on God. Here every priest is allowed

to share the central religious experience of the saints; comes up to the frontiers of the supernatural, stands in that Upper Room whose window opens towards Calvary, commemorates in awe and joy the great movement of charity of which the Church was born, and renews the sacred action in and through which the divine self-giving is set forth, the soul is nourished, and the Church and her Master meet. His own private prayer can hardly fail to be deeply coloured by this great religious act; or, as it grows in depth and breadth, to be more and more harmonized to the rhythm of the Eucharistic life, as the various branches of the Catholic Church set it before us.

There is no need to dwell on the first part of the service, the prayers of approach and the Ministry of the Word. All this, of course, has its obvious counterpart in the reading, meditation, and prayer, the faithful discipline of mind and heart, which prepare, support, and condition our life of communion with God. But far more important for the priest's own interior life are the implications of that great movement of self-giving and approach to God which begins with the Offertory, and rises to its culmination in the Eucharistic prayer.

The Offertory is now so reduced and identified with the collection, that we almost forget its great liturgical and spiritual significance. Yet it still represents the actual oblation of the bread and wine, the raw material of communion, which God is to accept and consecrate, and so by implication the offering to Him for His purpose of the whole of our natural life, the cost, the sacrifice without which there is no living prayer; and beyond that the self-offering of the whole Church in and with Christ her Head, for the giving of more abundant life to the world. So here we have given at once the essential disposition of the celebrant's soul. For the oblation to God which must be made by him is so searching and so complete, so much the heart of his vocation, that this ever-renewed act of self-offering must always stand in the foreground of his prayer. 'Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty—all I have and possess!' everything for him is and must be conditioned by this. His deepest religious preferences and longings, no less than his human desires, must take second place over against God's demands and his flock's needs. He is often required to give them the food of Eternal Life in what may seem to him a very crude and unappetizing form; and unite with them in the approach to God which they understand, but from which

his temperament and taste recoil. This and much else will enter into that self-offering which Thomas a Kempis thought the one essential preparation for the celebration of the Eucharist: 'Whatsoever thou givest beside thyself, I regard it not; for I look not for thy gifts but for thee.'

It is after this oblation, and because of it, that the Church comes to the second great phase of her prayer; when she turns back to the needs of the world and offers the 'great intercession,' represented in our rite by the prayer for the Church Militant, for all conditions of men. For self-oblation—sacrifice—is the only adequate preparation for the prayer of intercession which prevails with God. It means that our solemn self-offering under tokens is accepted and used by Him. This, too, must be reflected in the movement of the priest's life of prayer. 'I will offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call upon the Name of the Lord.' He must bring all for whom he prays with him in his approach to God; and offer himself, his whole life, for them. This devoted supplication for his people, held up to God with cherishing love, is probably the most effective spiritual instrument of his ministerial work. Because we are all 'one loaf,' the sacrificial prayer of even one humble soul does something for all. It is a supernatural action, a necessary part of the Eucharistic life. Intercessory prayer for others completes self-giving prayer to God. It is the stretching out of the arms on the Cross of life, to embrace the world's need; redemptive action. With these two movements established at the heart of his devotion, the Christian priest is a tool in the hand of God; possessed by His charity, a channel through which He can work. We are very far yet from realizing what a priest can do for his people in the world of sacrificial, intercessory prayer; bringing all the vicissitudes of life, all their sins, failures, hopes, needs, griefs into relation with the Divine Love.

What comes next? The movement towards heavenly places, in the Preface and the *Sanctus*: adoration, the vision of Holiness, the recognition of the glory, the Otherness of God. Christianity is a religion of contrasts; and Christian prayer too, especially in its priestly aspect, is to embrace the extremes of joy and penitence, the splendour and holiness of God, the littleness and neediness of man. 'Glory be to Thee! Have mercy on me!' The right prelude to the mystery of consecration and to the remembrance of Christ's Passion

is the vision of the Divine Beauty, and a grateful and awestruck thanksgiving for that beauty; uniting ourselves with the humble yet exultant song of the Seraphim, reminding us of the greatness of that spiritual world enfolding and penetrating us, within which our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving is made. Consecration does not, of course, mean something that we do. It is something that God does. Here, in our secret prayer as well as our liturgic prayer, our action ceases, and His action begins. We have offered something. He transforms it; lifts it to a new level of reality, which it could never achieve on its own, makes it a vehicle of His own self-given life. A consecrated life, therefore, which must be the goal of the priest's interior prayer, is a life which, having been offered without reserve, is transformed by God and made what it ought to be; a sacrament of His life and love, a means whereby that life and that love are communicated to other souls. It is as sharing in some faint degree in our Lord's High-Priestly action, bringing the needs of the world to the altar of God, and going forth from the altar of God bringing bread and wine to the needs of the world, that the Christian priest's life of prayer must be lived. And this rich life of prayer, again and again bringing him close to things infinite and eternal, yet never separating him from the natural life, he shall lift up to God, offer in its wholeness, for the manifold needs of men. Here is the mould into which he can pour all his thirst for God, all his self-giving to God, all his love and concern for souls.

## II

**W**E GO ON to consider how the parish priest can best draw his people, in the various ways and degrees suited to them, into the life of prayer; wake up their sense of God, and develop their latent spiritual capacities. That, of course, is his central task as a shepherd of souls. He is called to the building up of Christian personalities; and there is no Christian personality where the life is not based on virtual or actual prayer. I am not one of those people who think that prayer can be taught, or that the many excellent text books on the subject can by themselves cause one single soul to pray. God and God alone can reveal to the soul its capacity for communion with Him; and until He does so, whatever other people may tell it about prayer, it remains ignorant of what prayer really is. But it is possible to prepare the ground; to convey by suggestion that which cannot be conveyed in set terms, clear away obstacles, create a favourable atmosphere for the emergence of the spirit of prayer.

What, then, are the chief factors which the parish priest has at his disposal for this purpose? Primarily, I think, they are three. First his own life of prayer, his communion with God; next, the parish church, and that which is done in it; last, the formation of praying groups. We begin therefore by considering the matter under these three heads.

First, the priest's own devotional life. This is decisive. The primary way in which he can lead his people to pray is by doing it himself. The spirit of prayer is far more easily caught than taught. By a very large proportion of his flock, its nature will only be realized in so far as they see it in him, and discover that for him it is the very substance of life. 'For their sakes I sanctify Myself.' That text has a most searching application to the priestly members of the Body of Christ. Cold, perfunctory, negligent prayer in the minister of religion is not only a personal fault and personal loss. It is a sin against his people; he fails his neighbour in a vital matter, as well as failing God. Therefore the first step towards deepening the life of prayer in a parish, is nearly always deepening it in the life of the parish priest. It



has to begin somewhere; and we cannot count on its beginning anywhere else.

In the letters of that great teacher of souls, the Abbe de Tourville, there is a message in which he describes how he found himself confronted by the problem of teaching others how to live the life of prayer, under conditions of great personal difficulty as to health and other limitations: and how he realized that the essential point was that he himself must be, and go on being, his own first pupil. All those qualities of humble dependence on God, love, faithfulness, courage, self-oblivion, and tranquillity of soul which it demands could only be imparted in so far as he possessed and fostered them in himself. I am sure that this is the root of the matter. The old-fashioned phrase about 'leading' others in prayer, has a deep truth in it. The shepherd goes before, and the sheep follow after; some of them at any rate. Therefore the shepherd of souls does best, not when he turns to his people, to teach and exhort them—though of course that has its place—but when he turns towards God and goes before them. It is always by that which he does, not by that which he says, that they will learn the secret of prayer.

The priest who prays often in his own church, for whom it is a spiritual home, a place where he meets God, is the only one who has any chance of persuading his people to pray in their own church. True devotion can only be taught by the direct method. The mere presence and atmosphere of a pastor who does what he says, and does more than he says—for whom prayer is the central reality of life—who comes early into his church to make his preparation before the Eucharist, is absorbed in that which he is going to do, does it with recollection and love, and returns to the church to make his thanksgiving among those to whom he has given the Bread of Life—this teaches prayer. So, too, the saying of Matins and Evensong in church is a most valuable help to the same end. Even though the priest may often do this alone, the very fact that he does it counts. It is an act of devotion to God, done for his people; and if it entails a sacrifice of convenience or time, all the better.

It is noticeable that those who do not set much store by institutional religion, always respect those whose religious practices cost them something, and who fulfil the religious obligations which

they have taken on. Many who cannot or will not join in liturgical worship will yet be made to take that worship more seriously than before, because the parish priest is seen to find time for it, and shows it to be for him one of the ruling realities of daily life. Izaak Walton, in his life of George Herbert, describes how Mr. Herbert went twice every day to his church of Bemerton, rang the bell, and said his daily Office; and because all the common people loved him dearly, how even the ploughman would pause in his ploughing when 'Mr. Herbert's saints' bell rang to prayers.' That might still happen; and if it did, it would mean that twice a day the spirit of prayer was radiating from the church, which is intended as its visible shrine and abiding place, to permeate the common life of the parish.

To achieve this, if he can do so, is surely a part of the vocation of every parish priest. It is true that only a minority of the parishioners will be affected; and at first perhaps no one will be affected. Here as elsewhere the minister of Christ must be prepared to endure much spiritual loneliness, and dispense with outward signs of success. But this fact must never discourage us. All the effective things in the history of the Church have been begun by individuals, and done by small groups. 'The Holy Spirit,' said Bishop Gore, 'always works through minorities.' In every parish, it is certain that the spiritually alert, those who are already disposed to prayer, will be in the minority. But it is of the first importance for the priest to get hold of them, ally himself with them, instruct and encourage them; make a nucleus and start there. That was our Lord's method; the little group of devoted souls as the instruments of wider evangelization.

Of course the fact that he conducts the services gives the priest an unparalleled opportunity to train his congregation in prayer. In those services, every aspect of the life of prayer is expressed; penitence and trust, adoration and thanksgiving, self-offering and confident demand, devotion to Christ and praise of the Eternal God. In so far as he gives these great spiritual actions their full reality and worth, he is teaching by demonstration what worship is. The services of the Church are the real schools of prayer, when they are used rightly; and when the congregation is helped, far more than is usually done, to understand the full significance of the various parts of Morning and Evening Prayer and the Eucharist.

After the careful and disciplined development of his personal life towards God, I think the priest's next step in teaching his people to pray, in so far as this is possible, will be the bit-by-bit interpretation of the services. A complete transformation of their attitude to those services can be effected by showing them what the liturgy means and is, what tremendous realities it expresses; getting behind the beautiful Tudor English, and the symbolism which so often means nothing to those who use it, and revealing the great spiritual action in which we take part when we join the Church's corporate worship. And further, linking this spiritual action—with which the liturgy is the outward dress—with the actualities of daily life on one hand, and the unchanging fact of God on the other hand.

Of course there are plenty of useful little books on these subjects in the tract-case; but only a minority are going to buy and study the contents of the tract-case, and generally those who least need to do so—the people who are already interested in the details of worship. Nor will reading have the same effect as oral teaching about the meaning of the services, given in the church where they worship, by the clergyman with whom they worship. There are many parishes where 'Down with the Sermon, and up with the Instruction' would alone work a great renewal of the devotional life. The mere information, for instance, that the collect of the day is meant to collect and present before God all the secret prayers of the faithful, and should be accompanied by a silent act of prayer, is news to a surprising number of instructed Christians. So too plain addresses, with knowledge behind them, about what the psalms and canticles mean, and with what intention they are used by the Church, what spiritual riches are hidden in them, and what great dispositions and needs of the soul they imply—translating and interpreting the service, bit by bit—this will be rewarded by the creation of an interested, intelligent, and really corporate parochial worship.

I hesitate to appeal to personal experience as regards the extent to which this is needed; but I will say this. A short time ago I gave a series of retreat addresses on the Lord's Prayer. They did not deal in high or peculiar spiritual doctrine; but did try to bring out the real meaning and balance of the prayer—which is, of course, a complete direction for the life of communion with God. The result of these simple instructions was startling. Person after person—all

educated Church-women, sufficiently drawn to the life of prayer to come into retreat—came to me saying that they had never before realized the meaning and scope of the prayer; and several frankly confessed that they had always found it boring. A set of addresses on the Holy Communion Service had very much the same result. I became convinced that here there is great scope for teaching; and that only a minority of practising Anglicans now make the connection between the formulas of the Prayer Book and the deep realities of the life of prayer, which those formulas are intended to express, and indeed do express. This means that they have only a very vague idea of what it is that they are doing when they take part in the Church's liturgical life; and if they only have that, they will not be deeply interested in doing it.

We go on to the priest's second asset: the parish church, considered not as a convenient place for Sunday worship, but as a House of Prayer, a home of the Spirit, a place set apart for the exclusive purpose of communion with God; and therefore an abiding witness to His reality, His attraction, His demand. In that building and all that it stands for, he has his great opportunity for making prayer a vivid fact in parochial life. It goes without saying that the church will be kept open. The open church is already a visible symbol of the loving welcome of God. But more than this, it must have a welcoming atmosphere; and possibly its priest and those who think with him will have to pray in it much, before that atmosphere is produced. Nevertheless, it can be produced. Nothing is more marked, to people of even a moderate degree of sensitiveness, than the difference between the bleak frowstiness of the 'convenient place of worship' left empty all the week, and the homelike air of the church which its people—even a few people— frequent for prayer. It is useless to put the usual little notice in the porch about prayer and meditation, unless a real effort is made to turn the church into a place where people desire to pray, and can pray. Such things, of course, as the homely and attractive Children's Corner, or the chapel which is used for weekday services, and is kept fresh with flowers and furnished with devotional books, come in to help. But that which helps most is the friendly shelter of a building which is wholly dedicated to intercourse with the Unseen, and therefore full of suggestions which help our attention to God; the separation it effects

from the sounds, demands, and complications of everyday life, the quiet and security from interruption. The church is there to give all this; and in giving it, to provide a powerful stimulus to prayer.

Of course people, and especially English people, need a great deal of support and encouragement if they are to form the habit of using their church for prayer; but all the efforts made in this direction, in sermons, teaching, private conversation, and example, are more than worth while. Young people, especially confirmation candidates and guild members, should be trained to regard this as the normal thing to do. Many of them have no other chance of privacy; and it is useless to insist on the importance of prayer, or to speak to their elders on the strength and tranquillity which come from the habit of silent waiting on God, unless some attempt is made to provide them with suitable conditions. There are already many churches, in London and large towns, which are such homes of prayer; where people come in and out during the whole day, and especially after work in the evening, to dwell for a little while on the things of God and 'escape from the weary round of harassing thoughts into His Eternal Presence.' There might be, and ought to be, such a living church in every parish, accepted as a matter of course and used as a matter of course; if its immense spiritual importance were realized, and those responsible for the religious life of the parish were determined at all costs to bring it into existence, whatever the apparent difficulties might be. This brings us to the last of the three resources which every parish priest has at his disposal, for the fostering of the life of prayer among his people; the formation of the praying group. I do not mean by this a hot-house association of pious ladies, whose extreme exhibition of fervour too often tends to put every one else off. This should be avoided at all costs. But there is surely no parish where it is quite impossible to find a few people, preferably quite simple and ordinary people, who care for their religion, and, if asked to do a bit of real spiritual work for it, will respond. These are the people who can form, as it were, the growing-point of the parochial life of prayer. They will probably be found among the more frequent communicants; among those who are already doing some kind of parish work; and very often, among the quiet, diffident, rather unnoticed members of the congregation. They should be asked personally and individually—there will probably be

only two or three to begin with—to undertake to meet in church once a week at a suitable time, and pray together for half an hour; or perhaps less than this at the beginning. At first, of course, the priest must take a leading part, help, suggest, and perhaps instruct; and the fact that, as the group develops, he will naturally ask it to pray for particular things and persons, will always keep him in close touch with it. But the sooner these meetings pass into lay control, the better. There will inevitably be much freedom and variety as regards devotional methods and technique. Some groups will generally prefer to pray together in silence; some will like to use biddings, litanies, or particular forms and acts of prayer. All this is of secondary importance. The important thing is that week by week there should be in the church this homely concerted act of worship and waiting upon God. The natural tendency of such groups to develop into a mere intercessory guild must be carefully guarded against. Worship, adoration, an increased sense of the reality and attractiveness of God, a deepening communion with Christ—these should be their first concern. Intercession is not the side on which most of our busy British prayers tend to fall short, but adoration and self-offering. Yet powerful and realistic intercessory action is always the work of those in whom the Godward temper of adoration and trust has first been established. There are plenty of simple books of devotion, with suitable litanies, acts, and biddings which the group can take when needed for guidance; and from time to time, a led meditation, a simple picturing of a Gospel scene, and acts of prayer and communion with Christ developed from and within that scene—in fact, an elementary form of the Ignatian meditation and colloquy—will be found unrivalled in its power of drawing the group more deeply into the spirit of prayer.

These groups need to be formed slowly and quietly, through personal contacts; but once established it is astonishing how quickly they become bound together, lose self-consciousness and shyness, begin to find new members, and develop a corporate life of their own. If a group goes well, it will gradually become the nucleus of a network of prayer, spreading through the parish like leaven, deeply concerned with its life and problems, lifting up to God its anxieties, sorrows, and sins. Into it can be drawn the invalids and old people; all those who cannot come to the church, but who can undertake to

pray with the group at the agreed time in their own homes, and can be asked to remember its objects of prayer. In this way they are drawn into a living spiritual fellowship and released from loneliness; and are given an entirely new sense of sharing in the life and work of their church. All suffering can be transformed into prayer, and added to the Cross, and so given a new meaning and dignity; and here is one of the simplest ways in which this great spiritual truth can be taught.

In large congregations it ought to be possible to set going two such groups. One will consist of young people, who must be encouraged to conduct it in their own way, and whose religious life will gain enormously in realism and interest by the responsibility and mutual support which the group life entails. To it some at least of each year's confirmation candidates can be attached. The other group will consist of older men and women, of whom the first members will perhaps be found in the Parochial Church Council, Mothers' Union, and C.E.M.S. After a time these groups will develop their own procedure and technique. Their existence will very soon make itself felt in the quality of the Sunday worship and in the changed atmosphere of the parish church; the intimidating bleakness, which too often meets and baffles us, being turned into homeliness, with the result that it will be more and more used for private prayer. The important thing is to preserve the note of free association, avoid the official tone, irksome rules, anything which stresses one particular type of churchmanship. Nor should membership be limited to regular communicants; the prayer group is rather a way of creating regular communicants. Even those who hardly go to church at other times should be welcomed if they wish to come. But the nucleus of the group must be faithful in their regularity of attendance; and take their responsibility as to this very seriously.

I was present some time ago at the Sunday morning service of a country church, where such a group had been established. When the service was over and the vicar had gone into the vestry, a woman in one of the pews started an act of thanksgiving, which was joined in by the rest. They sang a psalm, recited some simple acts of devotion, and the leader said a prayer. It was all simple, homely, natural; orderly and yet spontaneous: a real devotion of the people, setting their seal, as it were, on the worship which had been offered in their name. Where such a custom as this is set going, worship becomes a reality

and the life of prayer will grow. Further, although intercession is never to be considered its first object, the praying group will become a powerful intercessory instrument. It will naturally tend to make its own the special interests of the parish, its problems and undertakings; and to hold up before God the sinful, the troubled, the sick. It is a humble bit of the Praying Church, lifting up hands towards the supernatural world, waiting upon God; and therefore shares in all the duties and the graces of the Praying Church. It should become, and can become, the spearhead of the spiritual life of the parish; a powerful redeeming and evangelizing force, supporting the ministry and exercising an influence the more profound because it is secret. Within such groups individuals will gradually learn more and more of what prayer can be; and this combination of the corporate and the personal spiritual life, praying as members of the Church, aware of their social responsibility and yet also as individual souls most dear to God, is, I am sure, what we should aim at if we want to make strong and sane Christians and not merely devotees.

Finally, though we have humbly to confess that all true prayer is caused by God and is a response to His incitement, and therefore that we are entirely unable of ourselves to teach others to pray or cause them to pray—except to some extent by suggestion and demonstration—still, it is clear that we can help their response, wake up their sense of spiritual reality, and stop various sources of error by teaching them in the right way about prayer. For that purpose it is surely important to have in our minds some general conception of its character and place in human experience. Even on the simplest lines, for example when instructing confirmation candidates, we ought ever to keep in the foreground the fact that prayer is not some separate devotional activity, but a part of the whole life; the bringing of all life, every bit of daily work and every human relationship, into harmony with God's Will, and glorifying Him in it. Therefore it will include not only the praise of God, and petitions to God, but spiritual work done for and with God, as members of the Church. This conception of prayer as something positive and dynamic—a Godward activity in which our whole being is involved, in which we do work—is far more likely to arouse interest and enthusiasm, especially in young people, than any emphasis on its devotional side alone. It has something to say to the vigorous and the young, who want, and



rightly want, a part to play in the creative action of their faith; and something also to say to the physically helpless, the sick and the old, who can yet make a great contribution to the Church's life of prayer, not only in the way of definite intercession, but by a giving of their whole will and love, their trials and sufferings, to His mysterious purposes, to be used as He wills for other souls.

In Pere Charles' beautiful *Prayer for all Times* there is a passage in which he says to a soul which has been delivered from some sin or danger, or been brought from darkness to light, 'How do you know whose prayer it is which has prevailed before God and won you this grace? Perhaps it is that old beggar at the church door, or the apple woman in the market, or some sleepless sufferer, or some little child; who made with simplicity an offering of their prayer, and it was accepted for the purposes of God.' That is a doctrine which, put in a simple form, can and should enter into the teaching of prayer to the laity. It means that everything can be brought into the atmosphere of worship, offered to God and so turned into prayer. Especially, for example, it should be possible to teach confirmation candidates that, in being received into full Church membership and given full Church privileges, they also accept full Church responsibilities. This includes taking their part in the Church's great redeeming life of prayer; a duty to be performed regularly, not for themselves, but as members of the Household of Faith, loyally taking their share in the household work, whatever their own feelings and preferences may happen to be.

All real prayer can be brought under the three heads of adoration of God, communion with God, co-operation with God; and of these adoration, worship, the lifting up of heart and mind to the Eternal, should always be taught first. Many people say that this is difficult, that in practice petition comes more naturally and is easier to explain. But if we begin with self-interest, or even with our neighbours' or the world's interests, we may never get any further. 'Lift up your hearts' is the formula for Christian prayer. It seeks first the Kingdom of God; and we ought to keep that truth in the foreground. We can show what adoration is, by the direct method; by the use of the great adoring prayers of Christianity, such as the *Gloria* and the *Sanctus*, or by simple acts of Faith, Hope, and Charity, which are charged with the spirit of worship and love, and so are able to evoke that spirit in those who use them. That which we do in prayer

has its subjective effect and importance. It speaks to God, and speaks to our own souls too; and the acts of adoration and trust in which the priest makes his people join, will tend far more effectually than any exhortation or description to open their souls to the supernatural and produce in them adoration and trust. No instruction on prayer should ever end without the practising together of the kind of prayer which has been taught.

As regards the teaching of intercession, it is surely of the first importance that this great spiritual act should be made real to those who do it; avoiding in the first instance large, vague petitions and world-causes, and beginning with the most homely and immediate interests and needs. Until people have learned to love their neighbours, fellow workers, village or town, and hold these and their needs up to God, it is useless and unreal to encourage them to launch into the great intercessory efforts which are needed if they are really, and not formally, to hold up to God in love the needs of the world.

Further, we should surely insist more than we commonly do on the close connection between prayer and sacrifice; and plainly denounce that too common type of prayer which asks for results to which those who pray are not prepared to make any real contribution. It is not easy to justify at the bar of reality the prayers for peace and for reunion which are now offered in countless churches, and by numerous individuals who are not in fact prepared to do one difficult thing, or to make a single sacrifice either of possessions or of prejudices, in the interests of peace or of reunion. Peace is very costly, and reunion will be very costly. Both will need great renunciation; a great acceptance of the Cross. To tell people to pray for either is unreal, unless we also tell them such prayer carries its own sacrificial obligation; and those who offer it must be prepared to take their share of effort, and pay their share of the cost. So, too, with other more immediate interests—unemployment, industrial problems, missions—about which Church people are encouraged to put up frequent petitions, but often do not exert themselves much. Our teaching on prayer would gain immensely in reality and power, and be taken more seriously by many who now ignore it, did we emphasize the intimate connection between prayer and our action outside prayer, and the unworthiness of mere cadging demands that God will do things which really lie within our own responsibility.

Young people, who instinctively recoil from unreality, and to whom the generous, the heroic, the creative make a strong appeal, can quickly be made to see this point; and learn to regard Christian action and Christian prayer as inseparable parts of one whole.

In conclusion, there is the question of the personal instruction and advice on the interior life of prayer, its deeper aspects and problems, which the priest may at any time be asked to give to individuals; the guidance and support of a soul seeking closer communion with God. That, I suppose, is the most delicate and responsible work with which any one can be entrusted; for here we are moving in regions where we often know ourselves to be insecure, and may be asked for help by those who are already far beyond us in spirituality. The only real safeguards are a great and confident submission to God as His servants, and great humility as regards ourselves and our own ideas. Patience, moderation, and lightness of touch, a consistent resistance of the temptation to press souls on, carefulness in not giving advanced books to those who are not yet ready for them, or in any other way trying to go faster than the Holy Spirit, are of the first importance. The growth of a soul in prayer is generally a very gradual process; and attempts to introduce it into regions to which it has not yet been called by God can do nothing but harm. It is always by the faithful and humble practice of the prayer now possible to it, and not by making spiritual experiments, that the soul is prepared for further advance.

There are two outstanding and opposite dangers which await the modern priest called to the direction of souls. One is peculiar to our own times; the knowledge—seldom very deep—of the psychology of religion, which is now at the disposal of most people interested in the spiritual life. This often induces an unduly critical attitude towards the imaginative and emotional types of religious experience; which are, after all, common to humanity, and, however close their connection with the purely natural levels of our life, can yet be the medium of a real communion with God. The imaginative type of devotion ought not to be condemned out of hand, because we think that we recognize its obvious psychological origins. To do this, would be to discount some of the most life-giving experiences of the Saints. But, on the other hand, neither should it be regarded as the sign of a special holiness. Like all else in the life of prayer, it must

be judged by its fruits; and allowed to go on so long, and only so long, as it produces an increase of humility, courage, and love.

The other danger to which the modern director is exposed is worse. It is the inclination to discover a possible mystic in every one who develops a passive or otherwise unusual type of prayer, or lays claim to visionary or other abnormal experiences. The general reading of mystical literature has produced a great crop of this kind of self-deception; often unwittingly encouraged by clergy who know themselves to be inexperienced in these matters, and are too humble-minded to deal with them by the obvious standards of common sense. All those who are called to personal work with souls know the type to whom his or her—I am afraid usually her—devotional life appears of paramount importance, and who is willing to talk about it at great length. The genuine contemplative is seldom found in this class. Those who are really moving towards deeper states of prayer will probably be those who make the least demands on their clergy, and are not at all anxious to be understood; quiet and humble souls who have not much to say about themselves. These can be helped much by encouragement and support in the periods of darkness and dryness which are certain to come upon them, and by guarding them against the constant risk of spiritual overstrain. In all this, of course, some first-hand knowledge of the great Christian writers on prayer—not the dilute account of their teaching now given in a multitude of little books—will help; and this is the knowledge which, plainly, every priest ought to possess as a necessary part of his equipment. But his greatest help in this personal work with souls, in fact, his only real source of light and strength, will be his own life of communion with God. In Him all souls are interconnected; and it is in his times of prayer—even when this prayer seems most difficult and arid—that the priest will be mysteriously taught the needs and spiritual state of those whom he is called to help. So we end where we began.

The work of the parish priest, for God  
and for souls, depends for its worth,  
and depends wholly, on his  
own life of  
prayer.

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