

DEEP CALLS TO DEEP

(The Father's initiative in human prayer)

I have let myself be approached by those who did not consult me, I have let myself be found by those who did not seek me (Is 65:1-2).

Like young Samuel who was in God's service in the Temple at Shiloh knowing not God so much as Eli, the priest, and so doing the latter's bidding, most people, who have the habit of praying according to their rule or early education, of more correctly, have got into a rut of spending a certain amount of time doing whatever they refer to as praying, live and have their being, under the unspelt influence of their belief in what may be called the anthropocentric or geocentric universe of reality and spirituality. It is high time that, like Samuel awakening to the presence of God when God kept calling him, they too wake up to the divine reality and realize for themselves the only true universe that is there, the one that may well be called heliocentric, after God, the Sun of saving justice (Ps 19). They need to undergo the Copernican or, to change the metaphor, the post-Conciliar revolution of thinking and speaking and acting with regard to prayer, becoming growingly aware of the relativity of the human categories to the divine.

Human impossibility of prayer

We may illustrate this with respect to two classical definitions of prayer that have endured through the ages. The first one coming from the Apostolic Fathers and known even to acknowledged outsiders of religion, is "conversing with God"; and the second one attributed to St. John Damascene and more in vogue in theological circles, perhaps deriving from Scripture (see Ps 25:1; 86:4; 143:8), is "raising of the soul to God".

About the second definition Haring remarks, in agreement with many others, that it "enunciates a tremendous truth indeed, but not all the truth. What is greatest in prayer, the reality which is most its own, is not merely pondering on God, nor detaching one's self from all created things in mind and heart, nor even contemplation of the created in the sole light of the divine. The most tremendous truth about prayer is that

it is real converse with God" ¹. With such thoughts Haring considers the best definition of prayer what St. Augustine said: "Your prayer is speaking with God." Thus compared to the second definition the first appears flawless. However the first also is not without flaw, as St. Bellarmine pointed out;² for the most tremendous truth of prayer is God speaking with humans and not vice versa, given the fact that God is not like human persons with whom we meet and strike a conversation at will. Even in human encounter its value, indeed its very possibility, does not rest equally with the partners; for the legitimately higher one in the context has the first say while the other listens.

Thus viewed critically both the definitions are equally flawed. As they stand they seem to speak of prayer in terms of some mental activity either of thinking or talking, without characterizing it in its distinctively unique quality and so making it appear to be no more than any other human activity except for the fact that the end of the activity (of what is the same as its final cause), is the divine. But "prayer is by no means an obvious or natural activity" though surely "the experssion of a universal human instinct".³ It is "not something that can be adequately described in equivalent terms from other fields of reality",⁴ as J. Sudbrack has warned in relation to historians of comparative religion. Philosophically speaking, it is neither an *actus hominis* (which by definition is any instinctive action) nor an *actus humanis* (which is any free action). It is rather (if we may think of a third category of action) an *actus spiritualis* (which is different from either of the above, being under the influence of the divine Spirit more than of the human). Making no mention of the divine Spirit's activity that is significant in the specificity of the human activity of prayer, as spelt our for instance by Teresa of

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1. B. Haring, *The Law of Christ*, vol.2 (Bangalore: Theological Publication in India, n.y.), p. 247.
 2. See M. Nedoncelle, *The Nature and Use of Prayer* (London: Burns and Oates, 1914), p.92.
 3. D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1974), p. 145.
 4. As in *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol.5, ed. K.. Rahner *et alii* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1975), p. 74.

Avila, "let [people] not rise if God does not raise them",⁵ the traditionally popular definitions misrepresent prayer, for the undiscerning, by omission of necessary emphases and so fail to generate real prayer among people, as will be explained, first, from a scriptural, and secondly, from a non-scriptural book.

Telling the ancient non-Jewish religious story of Job in a new way the author of the Book of Job made bold to break new ground in the traditional concept of God and, inescapably, prayer too. Job is religious person, accustomed to praying at a level unreached by most (Jb 1:5, 20-21). In the face of his undeserved suffering he is anxious to prove his justice and wants to converse with God as with his three or four friends. He knows God is not like himself or his friends (9:32-35) to be found at will (23:8-9). And yet he is persistent in wanting to argue his case letting himself go and remonstrating with God just as one may defend oneself against one's equal partner advancing any number of grievances (13:3; 23:4). But then he sees that all his attempt at prayer is a dead end for God remains deaf to it (24:12); and so he anguishes:

Will no one hear my prayer,
Will not God himself grant my hope? (6:8; see also 31:35).

Thus convinced that he is not heard for all his plea (19:7) he has to come to grips with the fact that his prayer is no better than that of the godless who can have no hope when they pray (27:8). It is then when he is confronted with the futility and impossibility of his human-made prayer that he is rudely awakened by God questioning him suddenly towards the end and making him find his level, necessarily unequal, in the exchange opened by God.

Here is an old, judicious but unsuspected criticism of prayer as conversation with God which is missed even today by the majority for whom prayer transpires to be nothing more than a profanised conversation with God, profanised because God is reduced to humanity, the state of another being like themselves.

Unlike the Book of Job Anthony de Mello's highly popular book *Sadhana* may not serve prayer in a theologically enlightened, critical

5. *The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus*, tr. D. Lewis (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Book Shop, 1943), pp. 91, 93. See also *Sacramentum Mundi*, p.78; and Frances Teresa, *Living the Incarnation* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983), p. 42.

way despite the acclaims it has received in the religious press here and abroad. It details forty odd *sadhanas* of exercises and it assures its practitioners that in the long run they will experience prayer, even prayer of a certain high order, and, in particular, fulfilment and satisfaction in prayer.⁶ Its author who thrived so much on the stories of various traditions seems to have missed some precious lessons in this regard. For instance *The Way of the Pilgrim*, a classic of the Eastern Church, had warned: "What is most unfortunate is that worldly wisdom compels [the] spiritual teachers to measure God's ways by human standards. Many approach prayer with a misunderstanding and think that the preparatory means and acts produce prayer".⁷ There was the clear Sufi warning too: "If you pray and feel satisfaction at having prayed, your action has made you worse. In such circumstances, cease to pray until you have learned how to be really humble".⁸ Flying in the face of such wise counsel, *Sadhana's* advocacy of exercises of prayer just suits the second view of prayer as raising the soul to God. One can certainly raise one's soul to its own highest, perhaps also to another's at times, but by no means, to the divine with its infinite difference. Realizing this one ought to be guarded, unlike the pious Pharisee of old and, of course, the modern agnostic or atheist with their secularized practice of prayer,⁹ in adopting any so-called expert praying technique devised by the learned and clever and scientifically curious to accomplish prayer. No one will deny certain originality in the exercises of *Sadhana* devoted to awareness and fantasy, constituting two thirds of the book. They may serve well for personal, psychological wholeness; and that is definitely a wholesome thing, and even a *sine qua non* for spirituality, but does not, invariably as a matter of course, issue in the spiritual integration of prayer proper.

While benefiting from psychology in the spirit of inter-disciplinary approach spirituality ought to exercise and enjoy its independent existence. A good psychology is not necessarily identical with

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6. A. de Mello, *Sadhana: A Way to God* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1978), pp. 3-4.
 7. *The Way of a Pilgrim and the Pilgrim Continues His Way*, tr. H. Bocovcin (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1978), p.17.
 8. Idries Shah, *Thinkers of the East* (Baltimore, Penguin Books Inc., 1972), p. 120.
 9. See W. Johnston, *Silent Music* (London, Fount Paperbacks, 1977), pp. 18-19.

spirituality any more than a logical, aesthetic or moral experience is necessarily religious. Surely psychological well-being involving upwardly mobile tendencies of human nature, has a definite likeness to God like all creation mirroring something of God's quality, as for instance space and time reflect his greatness, all life his fecundity, animal nature his dynamic activity, humanity all the above with the addition of rationality, and angels immortality. This static likeness to God found in the nature of the different species of creation (humans are not absolutely more like God than the rest of creation, but only relatively so) does not produce by itself any dynamic nearness to God, that is nearness of approach to God by which one senses that one has reached God, or at least has come nearer God,¹⁰ because God has no essential relation or likeness to any being (though we have an essential relatedness to the divine), because of his infinite difference and divergence. Where this fine distinction between nearness-by-likeness and nearness-of-approach is missing there is the danger of prayer becoming a matter of achievement and so turning into an exercise of self-glorification and self-worship without any suspicion of the rumour of God anywhere around. Is this not reminiscent of the Babel experience of building the high tower to reach heaven and its tragic end (Gn 1:4)? Such self-exaltation raises people only to the height of their incompetency and so spells their sure downfall as in Babel. But the lesson is not easy to learn and so one does come across a tantalizing exhortation such as the following: "When you are climbing towards the heights, reaching towards god (sic) -- because that is the only true height, everything else is far below -- when you are trying to reach towards god, you become the ascending one".¹¹

In this context it may not be out of place to recall what Gandhi has remarked about the deities of several religions and the reason for praying to them. "In my opinion," he says, "Rama, Rahaman, Ahurmazda, God or Krishna are all attempts on the part of man to name that invincible force which is the greatest of all forces".¹² From this it is

10. See C.S. Lewis, *Four Loves* (London, Fount Paperbacks, 1977), p. 10; and also John of the Cross, *Ascent of Carmel II*, tr. E.A. Peers (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1958), pp. 195-199.

11. Osho, *A Must for Contemplation before Sleep* (Cologne: The Rebel Publishing House, N.Y.), p.72. SM 78?

12. M.K. Gandhi *Prayer* (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1977), p. 30.

clear enough that Gandhi believes that the diverse religions are multiple expressions of *human* endeavour to apprehend God. The omission of Christ in the list may catch the attention of some, though it could not have been intentional. Christ certainly is not merely the human search for God, at least in the Christian perspective. Given the enormous variety of human approaches to God should it be surprising that they should be so divergent and even antagonistic to one another and above all unable to know God addressed so in prayer? Prayer in such a humanly inspired religious milieu will be altogether inadequate to rise anywhere near the divine sphere. We may, in fact, learn from the history of religions, as Nedoncelle says:

that men have constantly tried to reach God either through the senses that demand some external object (sight, hearing) or, more frequently . . . through those senses that involve participation, such as taste and sexual intercourse . . . and yet this untiring effort . . . is, considered in itself alone, vain and permanently hopeless.¹³

What is worse is that prayer of such human striving, often enough accompanied by rigorous asceticism and moralism (as is known to happen, for instance, in some sections of Ayyappa devotees), tends to become magical and superstitious. What is worst is that such humanly oriented unspiritual prayer may turn out to be outright evil, even diabolical. The case of Hiranakasipu of Hindu mythology comes to mind here. By virtue of his very prayer and penance he got the divine blessing of never dying only to become at the end of it all an opponent of God, and an atheist, and an avowed one at that, bent on making his religious minded son Prahlada like himself !

How rightly therefore the Desert Fathers taught otherwise, as illustrated in one of their counsels! "If you see a young monk climbing up into heaven by his own will, grasp him by the foot and throw him into the ground! What he is doing is not good for his soul".¹⁴

All this proves the futility of humanly made prayer, prayer made on human foundations, based on human calculations, developed by human meditations, and propelled by human urges!

13. M.Nedoncelle, *The Nature and Use of Prayer*, p.70.

14. A.J. Placa and B.P. Riordan, *Desert Silence* (Locust Valley, N.Y.: Living Flame Press, 1977), pp. 85.

To sum up this part by a parable, what child cut off from society has ever learnt human speech? Whatever might have happened to children brought up by wolves in legendary stories, we know what really happened to a couple of children found in a pack of wolves somewhere in West Bengal. When people spotted what looked like children in the midst of wolves and made sure that they were real children though quite at home among the wolves they wanted to rescue them. But the wolves would not let them approach the children. When the crowd went after them waving their sticks the pack ran off with the children too with them, except for the mother wolf putting up a stout resistance till she too had to run for her life. As the people ran after the running wolves they caught up with the children who could not keep pace with their protectors. Even when they picked up the children it was against their resistance. Later kept in the custody of the Missionaries of Charity the children were found to be behaving like wolves, walking on all fours, howling like wolves, etc. One of the two children died soon after but the second grew up to the age of twelve or so and even then did not learn human speech. Can then prayer, which has to do with humans in relation to God, whether it is considered speech with God, discourse with God, communication with God, dealing with God, relation with God, or communion with God, be done by humans starting by themselves, from themselves and within themselves? Surely we cannot enter into the divine circuit by our own resources. Those who try to venture on their own in this sphere of prayer will only find that they are talking to emptiness of facing their inner restlessness and so confronting their sheer inability to pray. What else can be the experience of human attempt at prayer, i.e., prayer done and experimented by mere human initiative and enterprise and machinery? If even human children brought up by wolves have no common universe of discourse with us how can we have or even hope one with God? Certainly it is not in the realm of the humanity possible.

The divine possibility of prayer

But cannot God break through our universe and present himself to us and so enable us to enter into his universe starting a discourse with us on a reciprocal level? Even as we cannot presume to break through on our own he can; and indeed he does so break through to our level and does seek to create mutual belonging, inviting us to be his own people and presenting himself as our possession (Jr 24:7;

31:33-34). This is the sum and substance of biblical revelation right down from Abraham and Moses, through all the prophets culminating finally in Christ desirous to draw and gather all people to himself. There is, and can be, no biblical experience of God other than that, as is confirmed in the final revelation given to John regarding the historical and even eschatological future.

There should be no surprise then the term "break through" lends itself to theological reflection. Tillich for one made much of it in his theology. For him it meant the dynamic presence of the divine (which is absolute, ultimate and infinite) in relation to the human (which is relative, concrete and finite): "Every act of the spirit has essentially the character of a breakthrough in the sense that the freedom of the spirit breaks through the structure of nature",¹⁵ like the wind blowing where it pleases without our knowing but making its effect felt in us.

Niocodemus was one who did not readily make sense of it all and for this apparent unwillingness he was taken to task by Christ. Unlike him all those who yield themselves to the working of God in themselves and so are awakened to a sense of the breakthrough of God will necessarily experience prayer without perhaps being conscious of it. For the most instinctual, spontaneous natural use of God language is not the nominative but the vacative case, not the way of naming but the way of acknowledging, acquiescing, exclaiming and responding to God who surprises us in his breakthrough.¹⁶ Does not Job experience this precisely at the very end of all his grieving and groping and wrangling about God when God speaks to him out of the sky, disclosing to him how all creation knows what Job has not known: namely to pray answering God's call (Jb 38-39 esp. 38:8-11, 34-35; 39:27; 40:19-20, 28-29)? So prayer presupposes, just as faith does, the experience of the self-revealing God who receives us in audience. Has not God himself said in relation to his people:

I will bring him near, and he
shall approach me
for who would otherwise dare
to approach me? (Jr 30:21b, RSV).

15. So Summarized in S. Painadath, *Dynamics of Prayer* (Bangalore: Asain Trading Corporation, 1980), p. 156.

16. See J. Shea, *The God who fell from Heaven* (Niles, Illinois: Argus Communications, 1979), p.11.

God takes the lead

It is in this context that a simple statement such as that God himself is the cause or author of our prayer¹⁷ as of everything else including our very self, makes a profound, soul-stirring effect on us. This truth is graphically portrayed in a tale of St. Margaret Mary learning to pray. Here is her own version of it:

And when I asked her (the superior) to teach me how to pray, since my soul yearned for it, she could not believe that being in the religious state so long I did not know to do it. But when she was convinced of this, she told me for the first time: "Go put yourself before God like a canvas that awaits a painter." But I wanted her to explain this to me, for I did not understand her, but I did not dare tell her so; but I heard these words: "Come, I will teach you." And as soon as I was at prayer my sovereign Master showed me that my soul was a canvas-in-waiting, on which he wished to paint all the strokes of a life of suffering, and that he would make his own impressions after cleaning it off.¹⁸

Surely prayer is the art of being available to God and yielding to his direct influence in us, of being still and knowing him, of waiting on him and attending to him, of passive doing in his presence and doing nothing ourselves in such a way that something may be caused in us divinely!

Such is the agency we come to experience whenever we pray truly. Against the usual, unexamined habit of thinking of prayer as a self-starting human activity and performance we are to understand that prayer is a happening in which God turns to us, advances towards us, comes close to us and communes with us in order to produce a response in us, as St. Ignatius of Loyola emphasizes throughout his *Spiritual Exercises*. It is God who relates himself to us primarily; and we do so only secondarily consequent upon his approaching and addressing us. Being holy he lives in unapproachable light (1 Tm 6:16). So all human attempts at prayer will fall to the ground and never help bridge the abysmal chasm between God and humans. But in *and* inspite

17. See J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1977), p. 494; and L. Evely, *We Dare to Say Our Father* (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1965), p. 33.

18. As in B. Bro. *Learning to pray* (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1972), p. 81.

of his very inaccessibility God can act in such a revealing, dynamic way that humans find themselves willy-nilly dealing with God in a personal manner, as did Moses, for instance, and through him his people. So the essence of prayer has to do, first and foremost, with the act of God who takes the lead and draws us to himself in his very self-disclosure and enables us to relate ourselves to him in our turn.

Of course one may point out that not only our prayer but every single one of our acts is dependent on the continuous act of God in which alone all finite causes function. But the act of God involved in the act of prayer is peculiar to it, prayer being an act that turns us to God; and it has definite superiority over the natural concurrence of God in our natural acts that turns us to ourselves. This understanding of the lead of God in our praying is part of the bold insight expressed by Paul thus: "It is God who . . . gives you the intention and the powers to act" (Ph 2:13). If, following Paul, Augustine could make bold to declare: "We will, therefore; but God works in us to will also. We work, therefore; but God, in his good pleasure, works in us to work also",¹⁹ we in our turn may venture to add that we pray but God works in us so that we do pray!

Continuing in the same spirit one may theologize: "God can never be the object of man's worship; he is always the subject -- that is to say, it is he who initiates within the heart of man the desire for union with himself".²⁰ This double statement expresses obviously one and the same truth about prayer in two ways, puzzling at the start and plain enough at the end.

However the way of puzzle arrives at and leads to a more profound grasp of what prayer is. The initiative of God in prayer is unlike what obtains in the scheme of human dealings where the two parties involved are outside each other whole and entire as subject and object; for in all genuine prayer there is in some fundamental way the loss of oneself resulting from the emergence of God in one's awareness. Jeremiah, for instance, felt that God's presence was overpowering and proved itself stronger, and all that not simply from

19. As in *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol 3, tr W.A. Jurgens (Bangalore, TPI, 1984), p. 174, no.1999.

20. Hugh Blenkin, *Immortal Sacrifice*, p. 30, as in Macquarrie, *Principles*, p. 488.

outside but deep within himself, like a fire burning in his heart, imprisoned in his bones (Jr 20:7-9). In other words whatever transpires when we pray is with the intrusion and invasion, if we may say so, of the divine in us so that we are ecstatic, i.e., standing outside of ourselves and so sense something of what Augustine has said, namely that God is more near and intimate to us than we ourselves. What of our freedom then? Given the fact that human freedom is not of our own making, but of the divine, the answer is that prayer is precisely the experience of our free response which ultimately cannot but be realized in the presence of God who is immanent to all possibilities of freedom and indeed summons us to it! Is this not the inner working of God that the psalmist was confronted with:

A word is not yet on my tongue
before you, Yahweh, knew all about it (Ps 139:4)?

If here God appears as the object of the psalmist's prayer contrary to what was said above at the beginning of this para, it is God who makes it possible for the psalmist, in a way comparable to a mother making her child address herself as an object. So given this prevenient intervention of God in prayer we may say with further nuance that God cannot be just an object unless he is at the same time the subject, always initiating, leading and acting. So with Tillich we may conclude: "God stands in the divine-human reciprocity, only as he who transcends it and comprises both sides of the reciprocity".²¹

Such reciprocity appears strange and is indeed defective as a psycho-social concept, but such is the paradox of the spiritual concept of the existential relationship between God and us, fundamentally different from the mutuality obtaining among equals. Nedoncelle has seized upon this idea thus:

With regard to God's relationship to me at every moment of life he is both transcendent and immanent, but I, for my part, cannot use either term with regard to my relationship with him. My movements are always in him and I cannot get beyond him, nor withdraw from him; and yet I am always far from his centre, which I can neither possess nor make use of . . . Therefore the prayer I address to God is already with him. The prayer I address

21. As in S. Painadath, *Dynamics of Prayer*, p. 200.

to my fellow man is external to him . . . But the prayer I address to God presupposes that, whether at the beginning or at the end, God is not outside me, but that I myself am outside him and external to him.²²

All this may sound abstruse; but the reality itself is simple enough for those who experience it as did for instance Abraham when he was led in deep sleep into a superior, undreamt-of covenant with God and so was overwhelmed by God. About his slave maid Hagar's experience too the biblical tradition has preserved the memory of how she called God El Roi by which she meant, "Did I not go on seeing here, after him who sees me?" (Gn 16:13). A psalmist's rendering of the same kind of experience is memorable:

Where shall I go to escape your spirit?
Where shall I flee from your presence?
If I scale the heavens you are there,
if I lie flat in the Sheol, there you are (Ps 139:7-8).

We would not be in the wrong if we believed that other religious traditions too in their purity would converge on this experience. For example the knowing Hindus who pray the daily mantra of Gayatri:

We meditate upon the glorious splendour
of the Vivifier divine.
May he himself illumine our minds,

cannot do so without knowing full well that it is God who makes their prayer efficacious, illumining their meditation from within, being the *Antaryami*, the transcending immanence. Islamic tradition too has an inkling of the same when it relates the revealing story of Abu Yazid realizing after thirty long years of searching God that it was not he who desired God but God who did him!

Before one attains this experience either all on a sudden or over a long period, one is likely to be faced with two problems. The first is that prayer appears to be more our own activity and exercise than God's. The second flowing from the first questions whether prayer for all practical purposes is anything more than soliloquizing or monoacting! These twin problems are more psychological than theological.

22. M. Nedoncelle, *The Nature and use of Prayer*, p. 78.

Regarding the first, it is true that in the initial and lower levels of prayer what is more striking in the conscious and so peripheral level is our striving and the stimulation of the divine is hardly experienced directly and immediately. But even the least prayer, which is not the same as false prayer, cannot stir in us unless there is the prevenient divine awakening of us in the unconscious, profound level. There is in every good prayer, even of the lowest level, something which makes for mystical prayer, namely the movement of the divine impulse. Did not Paul say that no one can pray "Jesus is Lord," unless moved by the Spirit (1 Co 12:3)? Teresa of Avila set store on this principle. So even as she insists on whatever beginners in prayer can do upto a level by themselves she does caution them in the same breath that whatever they are able to do is owing to the grace of God.²³

Concerning the second problem someone who was exercised about it to find a solution for the sake of others, raised the matter to God himself thus:

They tell me, Lord that when I seem
To be in speech with you,
Since but one voice is heard, it's all a dream
one talker aping two.

While praying thus confidently the seeker was led to see the problem in a way that resolved itself and so was reassured to continue praying:

Sometimes it is, yet not as they
Conceive it. Rather, I
Seek in myself the things I hoped to say,
But lo, my wells are dry.

Then seeing me empty, yor forsake
The listener's role and through
My dumb lips breathe and into utterance wake
The thoughts I never knew.

And thus you neither need reply
Nor can; thus while we seem
Two talkers, thou art one for ever, and I
No dreamer, but thy dream.²⁴

23. See B. Haring, *The Law of Christ*, p. 249; also *The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus*, p. 82.

24. As in C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (Fontana Books, 1966), p. 70.

This striking solution instinct with truth of what transpires in prayer and so pleasing at first sight, is, however, good only as far as it goes. On second thoughts we may discern its limitation as it actually switches the problem of prayer being a soliloquy from the human side to the divine. But the truth is that while God springs prayer in us we find ourselves raised above our level and limitation. As we constantly outgrow ourselves while praying and entering into the capacities of God we keep ever responding to God's ongoing activity that is above and beyond our own attainment. The sovereign independence of God in stirring us to prayer as we attend to God without stirring may appear to hallow prayer as a divine solo in action or speech.²⁵ But certainly the nature and reality of prayer in its fullness is not that alone, and to this we turn now.

One thing should be clear by now: it is best to locate our prayer at its source which is not us but God. In prayer God takes lead and we follow God's lead. Originating in God prayer is active and effective on God's part, quiet and receptive on ours so that all we can do in prayer is, according to *The Cloud of Unknowing*, to mean God, i.e., to leave all activity to God in our very attending to him.²⁶

Learning the language of God

Still it is proper to speak of prayer as an exchange, an exchange of communion between God and us, because even if in the nature of things he alone has the prerogative and power of the initiative it is precisely to evoke a suitable response in us by way of word or deed or simple silence, and so bind us to himself. In the creation of such an experience of undreamt-of communion of him with us and vice versa, the language used is properly and precisely, if not obviously, divine not human, and so cannot be reduced to our familiar pattern of conversation with their conventionality and shallowness, equality and camaraderie, temporality and evanescence.²⁷ All prayer consists in learning this *vac*, this language of God, in becoming more and more familiar with this heavenly language, even as children brought up by wolves were at

25. See M. Nedoncelle, *The Nature and Use of Prayer*, p. 95; and Frances Teresa, *Living the Incarnation*, p.48.

26. See Frances Teresa, *Living the Incarnation*, p. 19.

27. See M. Nedoncelle, *The Nature and Use of Prayer*, p. 94.

home with wolfish language. As von Balthasar asks, "what do we do, when at prayer, but speak to a God who long ago revealed himself to man in a word so powerful and all-embracing that it can never be solely of the past, but continues to resound through the ages?"²⁸ Perhaps that is what a psalmist too had in mind when he said:

"Once God has spoken, twice have I heard this" (Ps 62:11). The oftener we hear the one everlasting word of God reverberating tenderly and powerfully, the surer we learn to pray and the stronger grows our conviction regarding our prayer: namely, that our utterance to God, necessarily inchoate and halting, begins and remains for long, only as an answer to God's speech to us, an answer that is a matter of constant listening to God and so learning to speak to God in the manner of God, as the children babble responding to parents!

Is it not significant that in the Bible the first speech between God and humans occurs from the side of God first and then only secondly from the human side and that too hesitantly (Gn 3:8-10)? That biblical experience of prayer appears as an invariable characteristic in the life of every patriarch and prophet so that no one can miss the all too important a lesson. God surprising Moses and calling out to him while engaged in his work and Moses finding himself surprised by God to make his response, are then not to be considered exclusive to the great figure but are to be understood as paradigmatic for all biblical believers and followers. The prophets knew this better than anyone and made sure to convey this to their hearers. So we hear Johannine Jesus too declaring to everyone willing to hear: "It is written in the prophets: They will all be taught by God" (Jn 6:45), in particular, we may add, to pray. Psalms are prayers inspired and hallowed in this way and so they should reflect everywhere the kernel of prayer that we are discovering for ourselves. In Ps 40:6-7, for instance, we learn to pray thus:

You wanted no sacrifice or cereal offering
but you gave me an open ear,
You did not ask for burnt offering or sacrifice for sin;
then I said, 'Here I am, I am coming'.

So if we are to present ourselves to God, God should have opened our ears first and spoken his words in our hearing! So if we are to speak

28. H.U. von Balthasar, *Prayer* (N.Y., N.Y.: Paulist Press Deus Books, 1967), p. 12

out his praise he should have opened our lips first (Ps 51:15)! So if we are to fix our gaze on his wonders he should have opened our eyes (Ps 119:18)! So if we are to reflect on his wonderful reality and revelation he should have shown us the way of his dealings with us (Ps 119:27). So if we are to sing our prayer to God he should have offered us hymns of his own composing; and what are psalms but that?

Coming to the point we cannot avoid the truth: because of our essential weakness, incapacity and even ignorance in the matter of prayer (Rm 8:26), we by ourselves do not and indeed cannot pray in proper idiom unless God himself educates and trains us in it by praying within us. One who has personalized this mystery of prayer has echoed the same in these telling words: "I cannot teach you how to pray in words. God listens not to your words save when He Himself utters them through your lips".²⁹ In this spirit one may interpret what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: "Christian prayer is our speaking to God with the very word of God".³⁰

In this context what do we think of the familiar prayers, the most used prayers in the Church, namely the 'Our Father' and the 'Hail Mary'? Lest I should be considered jejune, let me learn on the authority of a theologian no less than von Balthasar. He found it worthwhile to write almost at the very beginning of his classic *prayer* what follows:

Just consider a moment: is not the "Our Father", by which we address [God] each day, his own word? Was it not given us by the Son of God, himself God and the Word of God? Could any man by himself have discovered such language? Did not the "Hail Mary" come from the mouth of the Angel, spoken, then, in the speech of heaven; and what Elizabeth, "filled with the spirit", added, was that not a response to the first meeting with the incarnate God? What could we possibly have said to God, if he had not already communicated and revealed himself to us in his word, giving us access to and commerce with him?³¹

29. K. Gibran, *The Prophet* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1926), p. 81.

30. (Bangalore: TPI, 1994), p. 500, no. 2769.

31. H.U. von Balthasar, *Prayer*, p. 12.

Prayer in and through Christ

So we come to conclude to a general principle that, like all spiritual blessings, no prayer worth the name can arise in and out of us unless God has given it to us in his divine word spoken and this word is best identified with Jesus Christ (Mt 11:27; Ep 1:3). Do we not have Christ's own word for it? He is the Way (Jn 14:6) in a double way: as he is the way from the Father to us so is the way to the Father for us. So our prayer can be in no other way than in him. So he bids us pray in his name (Jn 15:16; 16:24-26). And as we so pray he replicates in us his own experience in relation to the Father with the bestowal of the Spirit from his heart into our own (Jn 7:38) and the consequent arousal of the spirit of childhood in our lives (Jn 3:3-8); and thus sensitizes and attunes us to the Father's voice.

In the process we learn to vibrate with growing sensibility to God who wants us and calls us to himself. God calls us in his name (Jr 14:9), calls us by our name (Is 43:1), calls us, in other words, at a deep level so that we could call him in turn by his name of Father (Jr 3:19), the name which Jesus taught as no other. If God calls each creature in the universe to produce its response (Ba 3:33-35) how much more will not God do so in relation to every person (Ps 95:7-8)? The dimension of personal prayer emerges here as the experience of a discerning beginning answering sooner or later God's call, a beginning that ought to be continued with growing clarity and alacrity as God continues his calling all through one's history.

This essential nature of God calling us (1 Th 2:12) without which there can be no calling upon him on our part, has been phrased felicitously thus: "God is a beckoning word".³² And correspondingly what can be our essential nature except being responsive to his beck and call, not by ourselves, but in Christ himself? In Christ, because apart from him, the living temple, there can be no worship in spirit and truth (Jn 2:21; 1 P 2:5). He alone is actively responsive to the Father as no other, carrying out the mission of the Father in solidarity with us, uniting himself with us to whom he was sent and so making us too responsive to God. When we respond accordingly it is in union with him who abides in us. So one of the Fathers of the Church could say

32. G. Hughes, *God of Surprise* (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1990), p. 31.

that Christian prayer is listening to the very words Jesus keeps uttering to his Father from our own inner depths. Moved by what we hear Jesus say within us we may find ourselves repeating the same words after him (as is related of St. Patrick with respect to his celebrated prayer "Breastplate") or add "Amen" in spontaneous agreement with him; and thus experience our prayer through him (2 Co 1:20).

Prayer to Christ

As God initiates our prayer to him in and through Christ, Christ too in a similar way inspires our prayer to himself. He is the good shepherd, he knows his sheep, he calls each one by its own name and the sheep hear his sound and recognize his voice and respond to his call (Jn 10:3-4, 14, 16). One element of his voice makes us desire, like the apostles, to pray not only to himself but to the Father to whom he himself prays. So closeness to Jesus creates the atmosphere of prayer, as his disciples experienced. Prayer so learnt is far from what prayer usually passes for, namely, a verbal entreaty to a reluctant or even absent God. It is, on the contrary, a response to the pressing presence of God, calling us: a response that is spontaneous when the presence is sensed as that of a loving parent as taught in the *Our Father*, or a response that is wrung out of us when the presence is felt untimely and so unwelcome and yet pursuing insistently with its untiring call, as suggested in the parables of prayer (Lk 11:5-8; 18:1-5) that portray God either as the friend knocking at our door inopportunistically at the dead of night or as the widow seeking justice from an unjust judge untiringly and relentlessly.

But possibly we have an objection, and a sincere one at that. "We may say," as von Balthasar puts it, "that we have never succeeded in so hearing (God), that it does not come within our scope, that it is not meant for us with our particular characters and qualities, our occupation and manifold concerns -- our religious interests do not lie in that direction, our repeated efforts have come to nothing".³³ Spelling out the objection thus, and granting a certain validity von Balthasar still insists that we have the ability to hear the word or voice of God or Christ, for the simple reason that hearing the word of God is the same as believing and so living by the call of faith and not of doubt, as Christ himself warned

33. H.U. von Balthasar, *Prayer*, p. 27.

Thomas and led him to pray, "My Lord and my God!" So by faith the believers are enabled to go beyond their own relative grasp of truth, subject to limited categories and to receive the absolute truth of the revealing, self-giving God and to experience it as governing their life. They proclaim their hearing the word of God by knowing it, loving it and doing it! They are not like those who look at their own features in a mirror and go off and immediately forget it (Jm 1:23-24). Rather they are those who so hear the word attentively that they are not merely aware of being addressed but summoned to understand what is being told them and to act accordingly in the spirit of *Shema*, reinforced by Christ in his own way (Mt 7:21-23; Lk 10:25-37). So it was that the young Samuel was thought by Eli, and Mary heard the word, ready and willing to respond it, and Thomas made his profession (Jn 20:24-29), as also did the woman of Samaria (Jn 4:29, 39).

Prayer in the Spirit

As prayer is something God has given us in Jesus Christ so it is also something Christ has given us in the Spirit. As we pray in Jesus, the Word uttered by the Father, so do we pray in the Spirit, the Spirit breathed into us by Christ. The prayer we make in union with Jesus the sole Begotten Child of God has got to be the experience of ourselves as children of God, children in *the* child. As Jesus is begotten in the Spirit we too come to be born again, and that from God himself; and so become children in the Spirit, living our life in the Spirit. Being our principle of life the Spirit is active in our prayer in particular, and that at the very source of it. The communion between the Father and the Son in the scene of the Jordan occurs in the Spirit, as the Spirit hovers over the Son. So too in our prayer in the Spirit is the one who stirs in us, and stimulates it and sustains it in being and assures it of reaching the divine depths of love out of which God calls to us. St. Paul put it perspicuously thus: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a Spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a Spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba, Father' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our Spirit that we are children of God" (Rm 8:14-16 RSV). The God who sent his son so that the very offscourings of humanity could become his adopted offspring, sent also the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying 'Abba, Father' (Ga 4:4-7); and the Spirit becomes the active principle of our prayer as children.

So much so, it may be truly said that we are ever in a state of prayer, and that from baptism! Bremond has well said "Baptism establishes this new-born infant in a state of pure love; the fine point of this little dumb creature is, in some way, an essential prayer, but one that does not pray".³⁴ In the same vein Louf has said:

We received prayer along with grace in our baptism. The state of grace, as we call it, at the level of the heart, actually signifies a *state of prayer*. From then on, in the profoundest depths of the self, we have a continuing contact with God. God's Holy Spirit has taken us over, has assumed complete possession of us; he has become breath of our breath and Spirit of our spirit. He takes our heart and turns it towards God.³⁵

Thus he makes the very prayer of the Son spring up in our hearts and, as we surrender to it gladly, he quickens in us the filial sentiments worthy of the Son in relation to the Father.

Such an experience of prayer does not merely establish communication between us and God; but actually realizes and exercises the union of us with God.

Fr. A. Paul Dominic, S.J.

34. As in M. Nedoncelle, *The Nature and Use of Prayer*, p. 157.

35. A. Louf, *Teach us to Pray* (Bangalore: St. Paul Publications, 1978), p. 22.