

PRAYER, WORK AND THE LIVING GOD

By THOMAS G. HAND

RECENTLY this writer, together with a small group of fellow priests, made a retreat, in the course of which we met together each day for a discussion about various retreat topics. During our discussion about prayer, one priest remarked that charity after all is perfection, and that what is really important is that we work, and work for others; that the formal hour of prayer is really not so important; that what we must do is to help the poor, visit the sick, teach and write and preach; that work for others is the real life. This is the gist of his remarks as I remember them. I admire this priest very much; and since what he said amounted to an attack on at least formal prayer, it set me thinking. Also, when one discusses the life of prayer with some people nowadays, one finds that they make very little formal prayer, and that they prefer rather to float along, as it were, in the divine milieu.

Confronted with such attitudes, I will attempt in this article to explore what I mean by prayer and work, and the relationship between the two in life. It is obvious that both prayer and work are essential parts of any truly human mode of living. It is clear, also, that they are not really mutually distinct one from the other. Just as prayer without work tends to be unreal and deceptive; so also work without prayer loses its depth and efficaciousness. Each person, in his search for union with God, man and all being, must find the best rhythm of these two in his daily life. It should be of some help towards this to discuss two of the natural patterns beneath all truly human living.

The basic pattern of life and growth

It has been pointed out that there can be no personal presence except in relationship to the other, and that there are four developmental phases of this relationship to the other.¹ It seems that a baby

¹ The ideas set forth here on the basic development pattern of human personal growth are borrowed from an unpublished lecture by the eminent canadian psychologist, Dr Thomas Francoeur. The development of the ideas is largely my own.

relates to another not so much as to a person but as to an object which gives gratification, such as food, warmth, a feeling of security and so on. Such a mode of relating obviously does not activate much 'personhood' within the child, because a person is only created by relationship to another inasmuch as he is a person. This first phase gradually moves into a second, in which the other is more or less perceived as a person. But still the other is a kind of object-person, to be used for self-gratification. The child's responsibility – in the basic sense of ability to respond to the other – is still pretty much self-centred. To the degree that the other is for his individual gratification and use, the other is still more of an object than a person. This phase lasts for years, with awareness of the truly personal character of the other gradually growing. Finally, at about twelve or thirteen years of age, the first real non-self-centred responses to the other are made. This phase is characterized by a responsiveness that does not return to the self as centre, but rises to finding the true self in communion with the other person. The centre shifts from 'I' to 'we'. A person is one who enters into the conscious sharing of being with another conscious being. True personhood is only found in 'we'. In this third phase, the emerging human person loses more and more the false self, and finds the true self in the 'we' of an ever deepening and expanding community with others.

Each phase of this growth-pattern arises out of the one that precedes it, so that one phase cannot be skipped without detriment to the succeeding. Of course, the possibility of full personhood is there from the start, but is only activated by the gradually more perfect response to the other. In all this development, the character or quality of the other is of fundamental importance. It is only when the other is a true person (a 'we' centred 'relator') that I can learn to improve my response and enter into true human communion. The ever greater development of this third stage is as far as man can go with the natural powers with which he is endowed. By the use of these powers, his whole effort in the world is, or should be, for the creating of true human person-to-person relationship.

The fourth phase of development began with divine revelation. In a special way, at the climax of revelation, when the divine Son took to himself a human nature, the 'other' now presented to us is far more of a person than any level of personhood possible of achievement within the third phase. The self-revelation of the Son of God is an invitation to us to rise to a fourth level of person to person communion. By relating to him, that is, by accepting him in

faith, man is taken into union with the Son in a parallel relationship, one that brings us to stand with and in him in his relation to the Father. This vertical relationship to the Father results in our saying 'we' with him. This 'we' is the holy Spirit. The Father is the giver-person. He gives all being to the Son. The Son is the receiver-person. There is no receiving of being (and this of course includes the being of each of us) outside the Son. Since our being is received, we are by this very existence in parallel relationship to the Son as receiver-persons. This is why the Son took to his person an individual human nature. In this incarnation he presented himself to us as a receiver-person, and invited us to union with him, in consciously receiving all from the Father. But if we consciously, that is, as persons, receive all from the Father with and in the Son, then we possess all with the Father and must say – as sons in the Son – 'we' with the Father. This is the personal world of the fourth phase. Growth in faith is growth in this conscious possession through receiving. Such growth will take us even now into the 'we'-person, the holy Spirit. The soul or spirit of the Church is the holy Spirit, as has been said long ago.

Because, as receiver-persons, we are in the same order of personhood as the divine Son, the seeds of the fourth phase are present within the third. The third phase is of its very nature the communion of receiver-persons, even though the receiver character is not very clear without revelation. It is only when our personal being is revealed as taking place with the being of the Trinity of persons that we can begin our full and definitive growth as persons. The power of growth out of the third to the fourth phase could not be activated in any way unless the infinite Receiver were to reveal himself to us for relationship. This power of growth is called by the scholastics an obediential power. And it is solely God's gift of himself in self-revelation that has established us in the order of grace.

From these trinitarian ideas we can come to a better understanding of what it means to be led by the Spirit. Once we realize what a tension this being driven by the Spirit causes in us, we will be ready to consider the second basic pattern of life, the prayer-work pattern. We are led by the Spirit in the same way that the divine Son is. We can say in very human terms that the basic drive of the Son is to receive all being from the Father and to say 'we' with the Father. We can say that the Son proceeds from the giving Father as a receiver, and that with the Father he proceeds to breathe forth the holy Spirit, the divine 'we'. Man's basic drive is to 'proceed' in the same way. Man, like the divine Receiver, has as his basic drive

to receive all from the Father and to enter into the unity who is the Spirit, the ultimate mover beneath all life. Life is existence in unity. The Spirit is the life-giver precisely because we are led by him to existence in unity, just as pilgrims are led by their goal. Anyone who is working for true unity within himself and within the multiplicity of beings about him is being led by the Spirit. And since the Spirit is a person, and a person means conscious possession of being, man alone, with the new consciousness given him by revelation, is able to rise higher and higher, even to share the personal life of God. All the suffering of man arises from the tension between the disunity of his present situation and his drive for perfect and ultimate unity. It is the uniting Spirit who is beneath all our restlessness and hunger.

The prayer-work pattern

It is a common experience for a person to feel the need to get away from it all; to get away from all the multiplicity of daily living and to pull himself together. Such tension arises in a special way out of some experience of suffering or of joy. Both suffering and joy lead to attempts at unification, because suffering is nothing but felt disunity, and because all joy arises from a oneness mixed with imperfection. All our experience of beauty is bitter-sweet and leaves us in a tension. If this tension arising from our life situation grows deeper and stronger, the search becomes, either consciously or not, a religious search. Dissipation and disunity lead to tension, and tension to recollection. Recollection leads to concentration, and concentration to insight. Insight expands throughout the person, leading to integration and a sense of salvation. The happiness of integration leads to communication to others through work and daily life. In other words, these integrating insights must be further confirmed and expanded by working with and for others. But at the same time we must admit that this very communication easily leads to dissipation, so that the whole cycle starts again.

This pattern is found in a striking way in the lives of most of the great religious figures of world history. First of all we see it operating over their lives as a whole. A great suffering, a crisis, an accumulation of tension leads to a protracted period of recollection and concentration. This builds up to some great integrating intuitions. Then, after the whole personality is integrated according to the depth of the enlightenment, there is a return to communication with and for others. This same pattern is repeated over shorter

periods in the life of man. For example, in religious life today, the annual retreat, the semi-annual triduum, the monthly day of recollection and the daily meditation are all structural expressions of this natural pattern. One of the most ancient of such structures is the sunday observance. By it we are called upon to lay aside our work and return more consciously to the inner wellsprings of man's constant struggle toward community. These structures are most valuable precisely because they more or less follow the natural rhythm of man's search to find himself and all things in God. But the trend to less structure, evident today in seminaries and religious houses, is very welcome, because the rhythm of life of no two individuals is exactly the same. Such religious exercises are also very valuable, because often we are too lazy to answer to the tensions that daily work causes in us. How many times after it is all over we are glad that the structure has forced us to answer this call through a retreat or a triduum. Also, for beginners in the religious search, these very structures provide a helpful learning situation in which they can find their own more individual rhythm of prayer and work.

As can be seen already, we identify the recollection which leads to integration and insight with prayer. The communication inspired by the integration we call work. There are techniques of recollection and concentration in all the great religions. These bear fruit in insight into being. The greater the sense of union with all being, the deeper the awareness of the true self. It is this truly human activity that we call prayer. Christians follow the same path as others, but their insight into reality is not made simply with the light that comes from below; but within this light from below (not separate from it) there also shines the light which has come from above, the self-revelation of the Trinity through the incarnate Son. Therefore, in all forms of christian prayer there will always be these three elements: some degree of consciousness of the revealed presence of the living God, some consciousness of my or our relationship to the triune God, and some kind of affirmation accepting this relationship.

The other half of this pattern is work. All truly human work is in some way connected with creating a greater community. This is why we can roughly identify the two terms communication and work. All christian work is in some way ordered toward spreading that union with Christ which the christian has learned through the insights of faith. No man will find his true and final personal integration until *all* men are one new man in Christ. Therefore that inner personal integration achieved in prayer will always lead out

to others. This work for and with others creates community and is called communication.

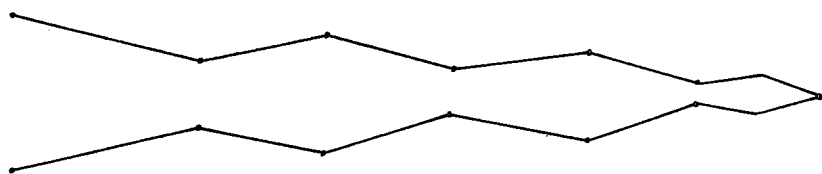
Returning again to the question that was raised at the beginning of this article, to think that a person is able to work as a son of God without some kind of formal prayer is in direct contradiction to the ordinary experience of christians. My self-identification as a son of God and my personal integration as such is arrived at only through relationship with those who have the faith. It grows in depth through deepening relationship with others, especially through relating in depth with other sons of God. We relate to other beings through our senses and ordinary knowledge. But if my relating to others is focused on the ordinary, superficial level of social relationships, then my personhood remains on this level. But just as the fashion of this world, this level, passes away, so this level of personhood will pass. We must gradually die to this self. But within this superficial level of personal relationship, there is a deep level which can be found but only through intuition. Ordinarily, the level of the true and lasting self is found *only* within the superficial level; and this emphasizes the value and importance of 'this world'. But faith, the acceptance of God's revelation of his true self, brings an incomparably new light to this deep human endeavour; man can find himself as a son in the Son. Note, however, that just as ordinarily the true self is found only within the activities of the superficial self, so also the Son of God is ordinarily found only within that concentrated effort that leads to seeing the true self. Therefore, every christian, to be worthy of his name, must be, at least in some rough and ready way, a contemplative. And we will only be able truly to work as sons of God if we pray.

This presentation of the prayer-work pattern can help us to a better appreciation of the worn but solid words dissipation and recollection. If you take a certain volume of running water and allow it to run freely down a thousand small streams, there is very little power or greatness to it. It is dissipated. But if you re-collect the streams and concentrate them by a dam, the stream will grow deeper and deeper and more powerful. Finally it will burst out, not at the top, but at the deepest point where all the power is naturally concentrated. There is only so much power in the life-stream of each man. If he dissipates this through endless use of his many powers, he can never rise to a greatness and find deep within himself the true dynamism of his being. But if he re-collects himself through some spontaneous or learned technique of concentration,

he will experience deep insights of his true self, which will integrate his stream of being, so that he will progress to a greater level of life.

Before concluding, it might be useful to express a few ideas on how this whole contemplation-action pattern should be brought to bear on our liturgical life. At a liturgical service, we should begin by being as conscious as possible of the other people present and of the main sign-objects that we use in the celebration. This empirical contact with the people at mass, for example, and with the book and the bread and wine, is where we start. It is within this empirical relationship that we will find the place where we meet as sons of God. Aware of one another in depth through faith, we find that the individuated being of each of us is at that present moment being received in the one Son from the one Father. We find ourselves as one, more than we ever dreamed was possible. In this common turning to the Father with the Son and receiving from him the existence we are sharing, there arises from our community in being the 'we' who is the Spirit.

Our final remarks on the need for *both* work and prayer can best be expressed by a graphic presentation of this pattern.



The widely separated lines at the left represent man's disunited, dissipated, tension-filled condition. The converging lines are recollection and concentration, leading to insight. The expanding lines are integration and communication leading so easily to dissipation and tension. Note, however, that with each recurring cycle, the converging lines grow closer and closer together. This is to represent deepening insight and integration. The diverging lines also separate less and less, because in each cycle the integration should be more maintained. The ideal is that our communication be done in recollected concentration, and that the present work we are doing be the source of ever-deepening insights, until we ourselves become a point of unity with Christ, and a centre of unity around whom and with whom all converge into Christ. Ultimately contemplation and activity are just one reality: conscious being in the eternal now.