

# THE PRAYER OF THE COMMUNITY

By RENA BOYD

**I**N MY RELIGIOUS youth I read both willingly and unwillingly many books *about* prayer, but I only began to be helped in my praying when I found a superior who could talk to me *of* prayer. She knew it, she had gone, and was going, through it and she had the integrity and simplicity to want to share it with me. That is the real prayer of the community.

She was a woman whose whole philosophical and theological background was alien to mine, whose ideas on modern life, class-structure, the apostolic life, ascetism, how a nun should behave, were difficult for us to share, but she really prayed in her way and she let me pray in my way and we could talk together *of*: of God, of ourselves, of the world and its happiness and painful struggle towards and in God. We could even begin to understand each other's ideas of class, modern man, the modern nun.

I think that like some freudian infant I've been looking for her ever since.

O.K., so I'm grown up, but where on earth has my mother gone? She was Church for me and she let me be Church for her. But so often when I seek her about the place now I only come upon people who want to tell me *about*: about the giving up of meditation as the downfall of all those people who, often in great integrity of mind though under stress, have left their priestly vocations, about the fact that those who live highly contemplative lives are really running away from real life. I have many very diverse mothers these days (and incidentally not all feminine), but whether they are of the left or of the right they all seem to talk *about* a great deal (mainly about each other, however) and to talk *of* very little. Cannot anyone help me to find my mother? I find bits of her in my classroom when the children and I really talk, at times I find her in discussion groups when someone cuts through our old or new jargon; I often find a great deal of her when groups of us who know each other well celebrate a dialogue homily and eucharist. But there was more to her than that. She spoke for people so different from me and those

like me. She spoke from a different age, tradition, social experience. She seemed to complete me by being so different from me, so much herself and yet ultimately so close to what I really am too. This oedipal separation is going on a bit long. Is it really not possible to get home to where unlikes can love, can give to the other what the other lacks without being untrue to self? Or is my home broken forever into those of one mind and those of another? 'She's leaving home. . .' or maybe home is leaving her as the Beatles imply, and believe me, she does not want it like this.

Too much is said and written *about* prayer, not enough is said and written among us *of* prayer. Prayer is an *of* subject, an experiential, subjectival subject. Yet it cannot be seen outside the context of community and relations between people. Why has it become a trigger point of division in the community of the Church today and not the ground of union on which the kaleidoscope of our different richnesses can shine out? Can we look forward to liturgical celebration of our unity in diversity, or must our more Church-community celebrations always be the lowest common denominator?

These are some of the points which strike one in talking of the prayer of the community today.

*Prayer as an existential or 'talking of' subject*

There are in life things we can talk about without taking too much care as to what our own experience of it and that of our hearer is; there is Euclid, the weather, scientific facts, some forms of esoteric theology, or the chances of Leeds United in the Cup final (though I'm not too sure of this last one). But as soon as we want to talk of something which has deep resonances in our lives and repercussions on our present and future security, happiness or reality, we tend to be chary of sharing it too readily.

Such a subject is and must be our faith when we come to the level of our expressing and living it in prayer. We can tend to safeguard it and ourselves by talking *about* it even quite glibly, as if it were mathematics – no one gets hurt by mathematics. Prayer resists that kind of talking, it *is* us at our deepest and most personal; it is a living thing, the health, the blood, of our faith. Our prayer is as alive as we are in faith, or as dead. But it is also as alive as we are *in life*. Here is where the sword separates. Anyone who has read a bit or had catechism drummed into him can talk about the theoretical explanation of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist, but

only those who have lived it can talk of prayer and mean something. And perhaps only those who have really lived their lives, instead of floating through them, can ultimately talk about the life of prayer or the prayer of life.

Prayer and talk of prayer comes out of a person's life and cannot easily be separated from it. Prayer is the human person standing before the divine Person, the Father. Certainly it cannot be separated from what we and tradition know of the divine Person through his revelation in history and in Scripture. But then neither can it be separated from the human person as he has been, is and will be. He who prays is totally himself when he is praying; he does not become a chemically pure substance when he enters the church, falls on his knees or shuts his study door. All that he is and has enters with him and stands 'before' God with him in his prayer. The substance of his prayer is 'God and himself', as Newman says. But the substance of himself, what is that?

Who am I? I'm me, unique, but I am also so many things, so many people, so many events. No matter where I hide myself, how I pretend to myself, I am already in myself a community. Oh not 'poetically' as a figure of speech, but truly, even scientifically – if you count social psychology and sociology as sciences. All I have been and done, my early family relations and experiences, my education and schoolmates, my formation of spirit, my work, the people I have loved and grown by, the people I have hated and been stunted by, the events I have overcome and integrated into my life and the events which have overcome me, all are *in me* and *are me*. I 'am my history' (Heidegger). All I have lived is somehow in me helping me or hindering me but at any rate influencing me, marking how I see life and others, what I see in life and others, how and what I hear life and others say to me, even how I think life and what I do with life and with what it offers me.

This, my experience of life, 'good' and 'bad', is in me more deeply than all the theories I have read, or heard or pretend to hold. This practical knowledge of life is what really moves my life, and crisis situations show this to be true. The theories about life which are of any good to us are those which arise from our experience reflected on, or those which, when heard, chime deep down in ourselves as something at least partly already 'heard' through life. We are our lives.

So too then we, in prayer, are our lives standing before God our Father: it is not a chemically pure entity which listens to the gospel

and acts upon it. How often have each of us at one time or another heard or read a page of the gospel, which we thought we knew by heart, and suddenly been struck by it as by a new force. Something we have just lived through or something that has just been re-awakened in us from our past, has suddenly 'heard' the word of God. We have heard the word of God with our lives instead of with our slow ears. The community which is within us has been touched by the Word of God. It has lightened up our lives, but our lives have also lightened up God's word. 'The world', says Yves Congar, 'is knocking at the door of the Church asking her to open the gospels at the right page'. Our lives are knocking at the door of our christian selves asking us really to hear the word which has already been spoken to us.

It may be the young priest going through a crisis of rejection in his presbytery who suddenly knows what Christ's rejection by his own people was as he listens to the Passion narrative. It may be the ageing teaching nun or the displaced missionary who begins to know the meaning of the story of John the Baptist. It may be the man trying to live the crisis of his faith in the secular world, who suddenly 'knows' Jeremiah from the inside.

What we are, have done and go through, influences how we hear God's word. Our lives influence our understanding of God in history, in revelation; and our understanding of God's revelation of himself in history then falls back upon our understanding of ourselves and of what we want to do with ourselves. We listen to God in our own shoes, in our own situation, for our own needs and those of the world which is *in us*. Faith and prayer are thus commitment to a Person whom I see and hear *as I am*. Thus my total human experience can increase my understanding of God; and my understanding of God, based thus on my experience, can flow over onto my understanding of myself and of all things.

But the link between life and prayer goes even deeper than that. Prayer begins long before I am alone with God or confronted with God's word. God is already present to creation and potentially present to us, waiting to be heard in all that is happening in our lives. The seed-ground of prayer is life. The seed-ground of knowledge of God and converse with God is our lives.

This is brought home so often to the R.I. teacher. Let me give an example.

I once walked into a class with a beautiful lesson, appropriate to the age, stage and experience of a fourth form of girls. I just could

not get the thing to click. Slowly it came out (slowly because I was so determined to give them *my* beautiful word of God for them), that one of them had found a newly-born child on her staircase that morning and had discovered the reason for its being there – the miseries of its young unmarried mother. The whole class had talked of this experience and were alive to it. So my word of God fell on stony ground. But his word was there in the situation and in each girl's attempts to understand or to run away from understanding, to sympathize lightly or to condemn out of hand, to learn something for herself from the situation or to refuse to grow, above all perhaps to act to help the child and the mother, or to stay cosy.

God was already speaking to that class, waiting to be met in the talking out and the choosing, waiting too for those who could hear his word most deeply in recognizing him there in their midst, waiting so that the life of his Son should join more deeply the lives of these girls.

Life is the place where God talks to us, asking us to grow in our capacities to be, to love and to know, asking us to grow deep inside our very being and personality, in capacity therefore to know and love him. The saint is *the* person, *the* human being, who knows God and man: 'Jesus knew what was in a man', and he knew his Father there. Life is the ground of the knowledge of God; even the purest contemplative, even the hermit decreases the amount of his human experience in order to deepen its quality as the ground for the understanding of God's presence and love in the world.

But even at the purely humanistic level, the understanding of the meaning inherent in our lives at any depth has its own rhythm. Life can be lived at such a rate that it is not really lived at all; experience alone can never give density to a man. All real living and understanding of living needs its moments of quiet, of reflection, of solitude in which one enters more deeply into the possession of one's own life, moments where living is understood, sifted, purified, accepted, chosen or rejected within the self, moments in which the self chooses which self it will let itself become. These are moments close to the classical idea of prayer, are secular prayer, if you wish. They are moments of the reality of christian prayer too, because if God is present to our lives and experience, we are too often not so present to our own life and experience, or to ourselves in the experience; and so we cannot be really present to God in our lives.

'Prayer is a deepening in existence' (Kierkegaard). God is with us at these moments, helping us to understand that which was

already present, though hidden, deep in our active lives; and he pushes us out and on into our lives towards a greater capacity to exist, to be present to life and what it holds for us, towards a greater gift of ourselves *in* life and *to* life, towards the following of his Son's way through life.

*Prayer seen in this light needs the active co-operation of others, of the natural communities a man makes.*

Because in his life man is not an island, an individual pole relating outwardly to other individual poles, but is a being-in-relation, the simple system – involved active living – individual reflection – is not adequate to cover the needs or the potentialities of man's depth-understanding of himself and of his world. For the same reasons this simple system is not adequate to cover man's need to understand God through his life prayed.

The effect of relating to other persons on the structuring of personality, on the revelation of self to self, on the energizing of personality towards greater integration and richness does not cease at the age of five, nor with the resolving of the adolescent crisis. Nor is it merely the psychologically sick who go on needing face-to-face encounters to sustain and 'heal' them. Throughout life man needs the trust, openness and integrity of another, or other persons. In an atmosphere of acceptance and trust he goes on discovering ever greater realms in himself and his potential for self-hood. In an atmosphere of acceptance and integrity he can also consent to seeing in himself that which he does not want to carry forward in his personality, the mis-shapennesses he has acquired in the past, the unworthinesses to which he is attracted in the present. We are to each other the possibility of healing and building, not just externally but in the very depth of our personal being. We 'create' each other continually. This can be seen as largely the task God gives to each of us and indeed as the way he takes to meet us in this world now, as he met us in Jesus Christ. We are in some real sense Christ to one another or have the potential of so being, and our deepest knowledge of God is in some way a participation in his action.

Thus the life of marriage and the talking within marriage is, at the very least, the beginnings or seed-ground of prayer even when this is not directly related to God. If both partners do in fact relate the depth of their lives to God, how much more will the living dialogue of two people in faith be, all of it, prayer.

But religious and priests are men and women too. An obvious statement? Or is it obvious? The vow of chastity or condition of celibacy does not short-circuit the normal means of growth in humanness and in that sort of integration of God into one's unconscious and conscious life and personality. To devote the capacity of one's loving to God cannot mean to ignore the love of men in God or of God in men. The celibate cannot become one who lives only superficial relationships, at equal strength (or weakness) with each person, without the strong risk of leaving unfulfilled (or better unrealized) his true capacity for loving, and thus depriving men, the Church and God himself of the richness which it is each man's destiny to activate for God. Too long this dimension of humanness has been underplayed and even feared in the religious and celibate life; and this is ultimately of crucial importance in the building of the life of community, and therefore in the enriching and making real of the prayer of the community.

Friendship, group relations of a differentiated sort, the struggle therefore to relate and go on relating to persons *as they are*, in spite of the conflicts and pain involved, have not been encouraged because of the risks involved, because too of the fear of distracting oneself from the task of serving God. There are certainly risks, but they are the risks which must be overcome, not avoided, in order that life and personality and the capacity to love shall grow through the risk. Many of our modern church traumas stem from this, from a certain lack of human density through trying to live a too loosely related life with the best motives in the world, and thus never achieving the maturing effect of living through the truth, even if it be painful. The adolescent crisis in the religious and priestly life can go on into the forties; for some it may even only start in the forties.

Religious and priests, then, need personalized relationship, personalized community lives, and this not only to balance and mature them psychologically, but far more deeply and spiritually to enrich the seed-ground of their lives for their prayer and for their knowledge of God. They, perhaps above all, need to talk of their lives *under* God in order to see and know him within these lives.

Surely the whole meaning of life in community is that it be a place of such trust and openness and mutual knowing that one's understanding of one's own life in God is increased and that, through seeing life, and God in life, with shared eyes, from positions, temperaments, formations which are not one's own, one can acquire

a more universal (that is, a Church) vision of life in God and so an increased vision of God himself. Community life, talk, discussion, if it is of any quality at all, is the beginnings or seed-ground of prayer.

All of these relationships between people – friendship, marriage, community – if they are consistent with themselves should lead to prayer in something like the more traditionally accepted sense.

No friendship, no marriage, no community can be all-in-all to the human person. The very intensity and goodness of them almost force one to those moments of quiet and solitude alone before God when all that richness or strength must be taken up into the person himself, decanted, allowed to meet the revelation of God in history and in the individual.

But, more to the point for this article, no friendship, marriage nor group which is christian depends entirely upon itself. The deepest of its meaning is in God in whom each and all subsist. There are moments when what is lived and talked must be more specifically *celebrated* in God's presence, allowed to meet, as a group experience, the specific word of God. Thus group prayer and even group masses can be seen as the experience arising from the situation of the group which one then carries before God in a more explicit way. The difference of attitude between a group which passes from discussion or talk to the liturgical celebration in group form is very significant. Two examples may help here.

A discussion group which had been in operation for some time, talked long one evening of the sacrament of penance. Laymen, nuns, priests, all really shared their different approaches, fears, tasks with regard to this sacrament. The group then passed to the celebration of a Mass, listening first to Romans 7, 14–25, 'the inward struggle of the christian', then opening up a dialogue about it. The whole attitude of the group was changed, had become one of listening deep inside the self, deep inside the group as an extended self, listening to both the word of God in scripture and the previous word of God talked out in the discussion. The few comments were deeply felt, deeply heard, consistent with the group's first experience, yet interiorized, placed instinctively more specifically, personally and communally in God.

The second group is a working staff group, again priests, lay, nuns; but in this instance the passage was from a very difficult staff meeting, in which radical personal and work disagreements had been partly expressed, to the celebration of a group eucharist.



Here the word of God fell like a hammer upon the group. Each individually, and the group as a whole, recognized in and before the word of God the truth of the situation, the futility and disloyalty of playing at a cosy reconciliation around Christ, which would pretend to ignore the real disagreement. Yet this very reality and the strength to pick it up and work it out painfully became present to the group in the word and body of Christ. Life was taken up again after, not miraculously healed but each in his own way ready to work at the healing, recognizing the healing offered in hope in Christ, as a task. The group here felt judged, in the most positive sense, by God's word. Their difficulty was not glossed over or glibly healed by it but laid bare in its reality. Because of this realistic recognition and acceptance of the breach, healing became possible and hope for that healing became enfleshed in each member. The group was pushed forward into building its own future, its own history, in Christ.

*Prayer as the point of division in the Church today*

No group, friendship or marriage is for itself alone. Those groups which close the nucleus down on itself are eventually lethal to that nucleus and to the persons in it. To be truly human means not only to live, love, talk, pray, be Church, with those who are like us, but to widen ourselves to the dimensions of all men, of all sorts of men, of all sorts of time in history. The Church is not only a series of sympathy groups, no matter how essential these are. The Church is people, people with whom one lives not always comfortably and in harmony but always there, always going on being there. We need more than those like us; eventually we need all men. The progressive needs the traditionalist with his values of order, structure, links with the truth and the men of the past, if he is not to enclose himself in an unrooted and over-subjective partial truth. The traditionalist needs the progressive with his values of openness to the as yet undiscovered, to the modern world, the richness of personal discovery, if he is not to become fixed and dried out.

This life of the wider community is enriching, widening for all. But it is no easy life; each man tends to see his position as the only one possible and the cry is 'heresy' on both sides. The choice seems to be threefold: many churches, a single Church but in suppressed and explosive tension, or a single Church in *creative tension*.

Creative tension, the ability to hold one's own views and propose them, yet ready to listen for what is of God in others' views, would

seem to be the gift God is proffering to the Church today and, like many of God's gifts, it has two cutting edges.

How can this life-community pray? Does its expression of itself in liturgy have to be so diluted as to please no one? Or is there not here a ground for research which is as fruitful as the research on liturgy and prayer in small groups?

Not all groups which wish to celebrate a common liturgy have a real communal living basis, even when that group is a community of religious living in the one house. Not all groups have the time or opportunity to tease out the common human basis of what all share before entering into the liturgical celebration. Many of our parishes and religious houses contain people of such diverse life-forms and opinions, not to mention mutual suspicion, that celebration of what is an unresolved situation can seem hypocritical. There would seem to be a place for liturgies for groups of a common life-style; and the workers' parishes and liturgies on the continent are perhaps over-despised in a more democratic Britain. Yet surely we can share liturgy with those who, though they think their faith in different categories from ours, yet share at its deepest; the fact that Christ is the ultimate meaning of all our lives. These more universal liturgies will be an expression of the Church at its widest and deepest and perhaps simplest, where God's word in Jesus Christ takes greater precedence over the kaleidoscope of human experience, where the emphasis is on God's revelation in Christ which is relevant to every form of life and of opinion. In its deep simplicity, the word of God in Christ's life touches what is deepest and most universal in all of us.

All of these different forms of personal prayer, communal prayer and universal prayer, whether in pure prayer-form or around the more sacramental presence of God's word in Christ, are mutually dependent and enriching. One form without the other is incomplete, impoverishing; but all experiences surely should lead towards the widening and simplifying experience of the celebration by the whole Church and by all opinions in the Church, of its finding of ultimate meaning for its life in him. Too long will men look for uniformity and thus miss the tremendous richness of a God, a Christ, who can encompass all the rich diversity of his humanity without suppressing anything. It would take much more than the sum of all our human richness ever to express adequately him in whom we all live and move and have our differentiated beings.