

PROGRESS IN PRAYER

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PROGRESS and its measure, a concern of every age, is the consuming passion of our time. Men point with pride to their discoveries in electronics, to the technology which produces computers and builds spacecraft for the journey to the moon. Progress also stimulates research in the psychological and social sciences. We find the same concentration on progress in the arts. No field of human endeavour escapes its wand. Progress is the line between success and failure. The more radical, more rapid the progress, the more heralded and exalted is the success.

It is no surprise to us, then, if many today inquire about progress in prayer, seek for the criteria of success, search for ways to improve old methods, even undertake to devise new ones. In fact the modern situation, so filled with perplexity, so full of uncertainties, so rapidly changing, gives urgency to such action. In this world 'come of age' has prayer come of age? Has man's spiritual development kept pace with his scientific and social advance? The criteria by which a man of the middle ages, or a man of the renaissance, measured his prayer-life, are they the same for the man of the secular city and the space age? If a man, and especially a christian, must in these new times seek and find a relevant spirituality, he must also, it would seem to follow, seek and find conditions and criteria of prayer to fit this new spirituality. We shall then try to declare as best we can what these may be and to indicate the signs which foster and further this life of prayer.

The dynamism of prayer life

We are familiar enough with the older progressions of prayer; if not we may find them listed in such spiritual works as that of A. Tanqueray,¹ a long-time favourite, or as that of Joseph de Guibert,² or in any standard work on the spiritual life. The path indicated in these is usually from meditation (discursive prayer) to affective

¹ *The Spiritual Life* (Tournai, 1930).

² *The Theology of the Spiritual Life* (New York, 1953).

(expressions of sentiment) to the prayer of simplicity in which reasoning and affection yield to some sort of intuitive gaze upon the divine and its attributes. From here the prayerful soul may be lifted by a gift of God into the realm of infused contemplation wherein experiences occur beyond the power of human speech – as St Paul and later saints declare – to express adequately. Such a progression is in keeping with the division of the spiritual life into the three degrees known as the purgative, the illuminative and the unitive ways, or into the three stages of beginners, proficient and the perfect. A basis for such a division is the scripture text, 'Depart from evil and do good; seek after peace and pursue it'.¹ An analogy drawn from human activity may illustrate this. The farmer prepares his field; first he removes the weeds, ploughs the ground and conditions the soil; then he sows the grain and protects it in its growing time from destructive agents; finally he reaps the mature harvest. Such a division does serve, I think, to bring out the disciplinary aspects of prayer; for the art of prayer like any other art requires for its acquisition and perfection serious and strenuous discipline. Given what we are, we do find the factors indicated in this division involved in the acquisition of this art. The same notion lies behind the progression from reading to meditation to prayer (contact) to contemplation. Reading here furnishes the material for discursive reasoning which, while predominant in the beginning, gradually yields to affective expression and then to rest in the truth possessed. Undoubtedly we find this element of discipline in all prayer; certainly no one would deny that some degree of discipline enters into prayer. Such an insight lies behind the remark of Ignatius who, when asked, 'Is he a man of prayer?' is reported to have said, 'Do not ask me whether he is a man of prayer but whether he is a man of mortification'.²

While these descriptions of progress have their place and are based upon what does usually occur in the acquirement of this art, they do not lay bare what we may call the inner dynamism of prayer and its permeation (penetration, suffusion, pervasion) of the spiritual life. If we define prayer as 'ultimately the loving response made somehow explicit which accepts God's will to love',³ or as 'the interpreter of our desire before God',⁴ or as 'man in his whole-

¹ Ps 33, 15.

² MHSJ. FN. I, p 676-7.

³ Rahner, K. and Vorgrimler, H.: *Theological Dictionary* (New York, 1968), p 370.

⁴ Aquinas, Th.: *Summa Theologiae*, 2.2 q. 83, 9.c.

ness wholly attending',¹ then progress in praying becomes growth in the true life of man orientated towards the final goal of all his activity. To take prayer so has the great gain of breaking down the seeming opposition between contemplation and action, and of giving full scope to the exercise of finding God in all things. Prayer is no longer conceived as something added to life but rather the very breath by which it exists.

On this showing, the rhythm of prayer follows the rhythm of the christian life. The more intense this life becomes the more intense the life of prayer. St Paul has described maturity in the christian life thus: 'When I was a child I spoke as a child, I felt as a child, I thought as a child. Now that I have become a man, I have put away the things of a child'.² The full flowering of this maturity lies in charity and leads ultimately into the full sharing of the trinitarian life of God, the ineffable goal of prayer. In this light, prayer becomes the interpreter of that deep orientation, inclination, urge or desire implanted in the depths of a man's being by the action of the holy Spirit. It gives expression to this desire in the various actions of the christian. It creates that word which is the response to God's word of invitation to intimacy with himself. It is the breaking forth into expression of praise, reverence, service and the other forms of the loving recognition of the gifts of God to man.

This desire for God to which prayer gives expression, buried deeply in the ground of man's being, a desire elevated and quickened by baptism, may be nourished or it may be starved. To foster this desire and its expression is to progress in prayer; to thwart or neglect it is to sicken and to regress. Progress in prayer is attained both by the use of proper methods and by the setting up of a proper milieu.

Environment and prayer

As a smog-filled city smothers human life, so an unfavourable milieu stifles prayer life. In earlier ages the monk withdrew to the desert to pray, for there, so he thought, he could create more easily for himself that milieu in which prayer might flourish. In a sense, his withdrawal was an escape; but he saw it rather as a retreat from conditions unfavourable to a form of life higher and more precious in his eyes than any earthly treasure; an escape from slow death.

¹ Lawrence, D. H.: *Complete Poems*. The phrase in Lawrence is: 'Thought is a man in his wholeness, wholly attending'.

² 1 Cor 13, 11.

In another sense it was an advance; an effort to foster the deeper life of the spirit within himself; a response to the deep aspirations of a truly christian heart. Today we describe this action as a flight from the world; oftentimes with a touch of scorn and a sneer. But these monks did not have in mind to abandon their fellowmen; they intended to live this life themselves and in their living of it to attract others, and so if possible thereby to turn the world into a milieu fitted for prayer. This took place in the infancy and youth of the Church. As she grew into manhood in this prayer-experience, she returned enriched through these monks to the world, to create therein by her apostolic action a climate favourable to prayer.

We speak today of involvement in the world. Preparation should precede such involvement. The prudent man reflects upon his resources, considers well the cost and prepares the strategy of this engagement. He will also withdraw seasonably to measure his advance, to regain his strength and to reconsider his plan of action. The soldier trains before he engages in battle; the christian reflects before he enters the arena. The Church acts this out on the larger canvas of the world.

Take the world of today as the place in which the Church and the christian prays. Which currents in its atmosphere do we find favourable to prayer, which unfavourable? Certainly the desire for authenticity favours prayer. The publican 'went back to his home justified rather than the other',¹ since he recognized himself for what he was. The quest for honesty in life and work, intolerance of the slightest hypocrisy, the concern to be true to one's own being, the search for the knowledge of oneself and one's place and function in the world: all these are hopeful signs of a good attitude to prayer. Man no longer has that confidence in himself which philosophic rationalism and scientific discovery and technological advance inclined to induce. He has returned to himself to find a being in need, fearful before the mighty nuclear forces within his power for good or ill, troubled for his destiny. True brotherhood is his quest and craving. This is manifest in the desire to break down racial divisions, to remove class distinctions, to accept and respect human beings of all categories as persons with their rights and responsibilities. There is also the urge and the effort to eliminate suffering of every kind and degree; to aid the destitute that they may be able to live as becomes a man, a man redeemed in Jesus Christ; to

¹ Lk 18, 14.

encourage and uplift under-developed peoples that they may share the benefits of man's inventions and industry. These currents may have their origin in the christian spirit, perhaps in a purely humanitarian wave. No matter for the moment; no one will deny that they are powerful dispositives to a life of prayer.

There are however counter-currents. They are strong and disturbing. Three deserve mention. We live in a society marked by no explicit philosophy of life. It is deeply secular. As described in Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*¹ and D. L. Munby's *Idea of a Secular Society*², such a society claims to have no official aims or direction. It tolerates all religious views. In it one belongs to any church or none. The secular spirit judges the world in itself and not in terms of some world beyond itself. Gleelessly captive to what works, what functions, what is relevant, it shrugs off concern about a supra-mundane reality defining its life and goal, about ultimate meaning. Its objective is desacralization, the enthronement of truncated man. Existentialism supplies a current of thought in which man in his concrete daily living appears somewhat of an absurdity. The existentialist, in a fashion like the secularist, bears down upon man in his immediate present, upon man in himself and his personal relationships, upon man facing possible annihilation. Questions of ultimate destiny are a distraction. The future means little or nothing; it is the fateful now that focuses all his attention and reflection. Such concern does not render prayer impossible but it makes it exceedingly difficult. Furthermore, noise is so incessant in modern life that quiet is golden and silence a shock. Scarcely an hour of the day or night is without its roar of cars, whine of jets, drone of factories, revelry of off-beat music. Time has become too short for the activities crammed into it. A man is constantly on the go, hardly allowed to pause for a deep breath of relaxation. Under constant pressure, he rushes to and from his meals, hurries to his work, puts himself to sleep with a sedative and rises to begin the race all over again. His life is a whirl and keyed to an exhausting pitch.

There is another more chilling current. We cannot exaggerate the deadening influence upon prayer of the 'death of God' propaganda. For who can pray when the being of the person to whom he prays is challenged? There are atmospheres which freeze prayer, let alone life. This is one. Prayer is simply incompatible with an

¹ London, 1967.

² Oxford, 1963.

attitude which declares God to be 'intellectually superfluous, emotionally dispensable, and morally intolerable'.¹ If, however, our age lacks the signs which reveal the living God, it is not that God has abandoned us; rather it is that we have clouded our vision, clogged our reason and hardened our hearts. 'For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made!'²

This is a sketch of the milieu in which modern man prays. Is it somewhat of a caricature? Perhaps, yet not exaggeratedly so. Is progress in prayer possible under these conditions? Surely, but the aids to progress require adjustment. First, we must adopt a right attitude to the world into which Christ came to redeem it. Granted a distinction between the sacred and the secular, there is not a separation but a relation and a bond. They are as soul to body. While it is important to situate man in his present surroundings and to be aware of his anxieties and to appreciate his problems, we must still keep in mind that he is a creature, dependent, in need of and open to the infinite. Fundamental to progress is the ability to master the influences of our milieu favourable and unfavourable to prayer. The way to control these varies of course from individual to individual. Yet the age old conditions for progress, namely a deep faith grounding a strong hope and expressing itself in an ardent charity, combined with persevering effort and patient endurance, can create a milieu of prayer. The man of faith accepts the uncertainties of his existence present and future in reliance upon the word of his creator. Anxieties will not cripple his activity; they will turn him to seek the support of his redeemer. So he will face the turmoil of the age with the courage and confidence born of his christian faith, confirmed by his living hope and fed by his compassionate love.

Progress in the use of the methods of prayer

Besides progress in prayer, there is progress in the use of methods of prayer. Treatises on the spiritual life provide various types. While these methods are all of them good, they are not all proper or suitable indiscriminately. For a good, even a tested method can be a real hindrance rather than a true help to an individual. Take for instance the experience of Mary of the Incarnation:

¹ Robinson, J. A. T.: *Honest to God* (Philadelphia, 1963).

² Rom 1, 19-20.

During this time I had the reading of several books which taught a methodical way of making mental prayer, with preparation-preludes-divisions-points-matter-colloquy. I understood all well and I resolved to put it into practice, for those books said that in doing otherwise you placed yourself in danger of being deceived by the devil. I made it a duty to undertake what I had read. I held myself to meditation for several hours and to mulling over in my mind the mysteries of the sacred humanity . . . which I saw in its ordinary charm, all in a glance and suddenly in the manner of an interior view. I resisted this enticement by the action of my imagination and understanding which were poring over the circumstances of the mystery, weighing the reasons of them and what it is necessary to draw from them for the practice of virtue. In my desire to do good I did so much violence to myself that I got a headache from it, which set me back notably . . . And yet the desire of following this book point by point made me begin my violences over again each day and strengthened also my malady.¹

Here we glimpse at once the use and the abuse of method in prayer. Many factors are involved in the choice of a method profitable to one's own prayer life. The physical state, the temperament, the character, the present engagements of the individual, the degree of progress already reached, are factors in the choice of method and signs of its proper use. A director can be very helpful here; but experience is the final tests of a right method in prayer. We ourselves, generally speaking, must take the initiative, try this way, try that, then reflect upon the results in our effort to find the best way. A labour indeed, yet made light by the aid of the Spirit within.

Advance in the spontaneous and acquired ways of prayer

I shall now attempt to approach progress in prayer from another angle. Art is innate or acquired. An art naturally possessed may by discipline and the use of proper method become more precise and more perfect. An art acquired by the practice of the same means may become a second nature. Prayer is an art, and as I have tried to explain, something fundamentally innate in us to the extent at least that the desire of God, our godward orientation and inclination, is engrafted in us by baptism. Our recreated nature is made apt for prayer. This aptness may be more pronounced in some than in

¹ Bremond, H.: *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* (Paris, 1933), vol VI, p 21. Translation by the writer.

others. Prayer, then, being to some degree ingrained, contains what I may call a natural rhythm of growing and reveals an inborn method.

Besides acquired there are also spontaneous forms of prayer. Fr Breton divides the latter into recited, meditative, spoken and silent prayer and assigns them in a rather fluid fashion to distinct age groups. During childhood recited prayer predominates. This consists of a set form of words learned by heart or read from a book. Attention concentrates upon the words or on the person addressed or on the object sought. From adolescence to manhood meditative prayer develops. While using a set form of words it intersperses them with pauses expressive of a desire and effort to reflect upon and savour the phrases of the prayer. St Ignatius suggests this form in his *Spiritual Exercises*, where he explains the three methods of prayer. We also find spoken prayer during this period. This species, while focusing upon a subject of its own choosing, breaks forth spontaneously from the soul's interior resource. It may be the outburst of an emotion of joy, praise, gratefulness, sorrow. But not necessarily; for it may be in a soul filled with dryness, a soul nevertheless desperately communing with God out of its need and urge to speak with him as with a friend or father. Finally, silent prayer is the prayer of the mature man, whose soul remains speechless in the presence of God, aware of the inadequacy of whatever it may say, simply content to rest in this entrancing company.

Even if fitted to specific periods of life, these forms nevertheless may overlap and interweave. I simply wished to indicate that, as the natural rhythm of growth in the Spirit moves from the attraction and delight of exterior things to the depths and secret of the interior, so with prayer. Progress in this spontaneous prayer is marked by interiorization, wherein the soul passes rapidly from the gifts to the giver to find all its rest in him. This is nothing more than that full intimacy and familiarity with God which so many saintly men strove vigorously to maintain uninterruptedly in their daily tasks. The reply of the villager whose long visits to church after work provoked the Curé of Ars to ask, 'But what do you ask of the good Lord?' strikes the note. 'Nothing' he answered, 'I look at him and he looks back at me'.¹ Deeper purity of heart, greater renunciation, a more balanced attitude to the world and to self, stronger self-control: these are the signs of progress in this prayer. They

¹ Breton, V.: *Life and Prayer* (Dublin, 1961), p 65.

manifest the long slow effort of the conversion of the understanding, will and sensibility under the urge of the sanctifying Spirit of the truth, the love and the affection of God. The measure of this progress is the growing and depth of this conversion.

I turn now from spontaneous to acquired forms and methods of prayer. Examples of the latter are the ignatian and the sulpician methods of meditation, the ignatian and the carmelite (teresian) methods of contemplation. It is beyond the scope of this essay to consider infused contemplation.

Some see a natural progression from the more discursive form, meditation, to the more affective form, contemplation, towards a simplified form, the prayer of simplicity, of simple regard, of the simple presence of God. This may be so. Such a consideration, in my view, reduces these to spontaneous forms of prayer. For the progression lies in the dynamism of man's spiritual growth. We are at the moment considering the methods and the techniques of these forms. Progress in their use will depend, as I have already hinted above, upon, 1) the disposition of the individual, and 2) the present state of his development. The experience of Mary of the Incarnation brings this out. Signs of progress in their use will be the ease acquired in the exercise of the methods and the ability to adapt the method to the conditions of time, place and person. The norm of their usefulness will in each case be the personal experience of the user. They are but means, good if they help, bad if they hinder the true advance of prayer.

Progress in human living is an evolutionary process. Growth advances by adjusting at every turn to a milieu partly productive and partly obstructive, enjoying the seasonable, integrating the internal and external factors of the individual into a harmonious organic whole at each stage from infancy through adolescence to the ripeness of mature manhood. It is the same in the life of christian prayer. An abiding orientation, a penetrating conviction, a continual spiritualization, a deepening desire of God which steadily draw godwards the natural and supernatural forces of man, in the face of prosperous and adverse circumstances, into an integral unity of subordination and coordination: these are the qualities of the man mature in christian prayer.