

WHEN YOU PRAY...

Modern Youth and Prayer

WHEN I was a university chaplain we used from time to time to have Saturday evening parties in the chaplaincy. These were never considered a success unless there were too many people in the room for comfort, there was too much noise from the record-player for conversation, and the lights were so dim that you could not see clearly to whom you were speaking. Given these three requirements, which were easy enough to produce, of crush, noise and darkness, it was scarcely possible to fail, and we had many successful evenings. It was not difficult to see why young people in the university liked this sort of party. If you were shy, a little bit homesick and feeling strange in the always fairly tense atmosphere of the university, to be able to join in a crowd where there was plenty of warm welcome, but no demands made for conversation or even recognition, was a marvellous release. The music encouraged the participants to join in with the body and the emotions and gave the mind a delicious rest. People met each other, but without any strain on the mind. Later on in their university career the students made personal friendships with considerable maturity, but these sub-personal scrums were valuable in their first years of insecurity. They catered for a need to be in a group at a fairly shallow level in a completely informal way.

So many people have pronounced upon Modern Youth that one approaches the subject with timidity. Nevertheless if I were asked to make my own pronouncements, I would single out four needs in young people today which have to be catered for if any help is to be offered. First there is the need for informality. Formality freezes young people. They think it artificial, even hypocritical. They cannot operate in that mode. Social relationships, clothes, the way they keep their apartments, the way they like their liturgy: in all these precious areas of life, young people like to be informal and cannot 'take' formality. It is a mistake to call this anarchy. They often have a great respect for fatherhood and authority. But they show this respect by being informal, and are suspicious when this is not reciprocated. In their world, formality goes with insincerity; so they refuse to mix respect with it. The second need is for personal relationships. I suppose this has always been true of human beings. After all, we grow or diminish psychologically by our relationships with other people. It is the law written in our beings. But I think that young people today are new in that they do not identify with institutions at all. A former generation of adolescents found it easy to have a strong loyalty to an institution like their school or club. The sort of institutional loyalty which Belloc made so magical towards the Church in Europe awakened echoes in many if not all his adolescent readers. But not today. Loyalty is towards persons, not institutions. Helder Camara and Mother

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Teresa are lauded, but not the Church in South America and India. Alongside these two primary needs – for informality and for friendship – is the connected need to live communally. I do not say that every young person finds it easy to form a community among his peers, but the need is there. In fact many of the crises which students experience are over their failures in this area. They mind being alone and experience loneliness very acutely. Hence the popularity of the crush parties, which were frequented mostly by people who had not yet found their ‘community’. Once they found it, the chaplaincy became less necessary for them. They took to living in communal flats where informality and easy personal relationships flourished.

There is one other need or characteristic of young people, namely, a radical yearning for justice. This differs from person to person. Some can be apparently quite content with life as they find it, while others make their lives one long raw agony over the injustices of the system and the Establishment. I suggest that this is largely a matter of temperamental manifestation – extraverts and introverts reacting differently, because there is scarcely a single young person today in the West who does not have these sentiments of disgust over our materialist *status quo* and longings to build a better society. These radical longings are rooted deeply in the souls of our informal, communal young people. The more religious and idealistic they are, the stronger the passion for a better world. This is often coupled with a real fear: fear that ‘growing up’, getting a job, getting married, will smother their ideals. They fear this awful future far more than any present consequences of radical action.

These characteristics of modern youth are not phoney. They have a respectable parentage, for after all they are the product of key thinkers who have formed the intellectual climate of the modern world. There are the existentialists, and perhaps especially Buber, with their insistence on personal relationships in an increasingly systematic, impersonal world. There is Freud, and the whole psychological movement descending from him, which explains how these personal relationships we make are governed by deep subconscious factors working to make man far less of an ‘island’ than he used to think he was. There is also Marx who, whether we accept his teaching or not, has made our conscience political and revolutionary and not merely social and alleviative. These thinkers have shaped the intellectual culture in which people today live and move. Only a tiny fraction of young people have read their works, but all have imbibed their ideas by just living in the modern world. The informal, friendly, gregarious adolescent with his radical longings is the child of Marx, Freud and the existentialists.

Communal prayer

It almost goes without saying that these informal, friendly and gregarious young people will find in liturgy the chief focus of their religious needs, because liturgy is communal and can be made informal and friendly. Chaplains to youth of all kinds find that the Mass means more to their flocks

than any other christian occasion. They quickly discover that informal and friendly liturgy attracts and feeds their flocks, while formality and rubricism do not. I have spent some of the most fruitful moments of my priestly life at small informal Masses in the chaplaincy chapel and in student apartments. The combination of informality, friendliness, open sharing at a deep level, sincere searching into the word of God and the presence of Jesus's sacrificial meal in our midst, resulted in tangible moments of grace. Whatever the passages from scripture might have produced in the way of fierce disagreement at the beginning of Mass, the presence of Christ in the bread and wine never failed to 'jell' us all into a holy communion by the end. They proved moments of growth for us all.

In a similar way, groups meeting for bible study, with or without prayer, catch on well with young people, provided there is leadership to plan the meetings and act responsibly during them. Without leadership they often peter out. But with the right sort of friendly and informal leadership, they also can be successful agents of spiritual growth for young people today. As with the Mass, the communal prayer groups attract and inspire many who partake in them to grow in grace.

Personal prayer

What about personal private prayer among young people? In the 1960s, when 'Youth Culture' was getting under way, private prayer was taking a big knock. Prayer seemed to be connected with so much that young people were reacting against. For Catholics it seemed to be part of the package deal of the pre-Vatican II Church which was in the process of being superseded. The detailed, excessively formal usages in the pre-Vatican II Church were all bound up with 'saying one's prayers'. The private shrinking-from-the-world spirituality which was enjoined upon Catholics ('Sweet light, so shine on us we pray, that earthly joys may fade away') was meant to be sustained by morning and night prayer. The lack of freedom when everything was a 'duty', not a joyous initiative, resulted in prayer being taught as the Catholic's daily duty. ('How should you rise in the morning? I should rise in the morning dilligently, dress myself modestly, and then kneel down and say my morning prayers' - Q. 358 in the penny catechism.) Lastly, 'Honest To God' had just been written, which taught that prayer was no longer possible for 'modern man', and american theologians were saying that God was dead. In this climate it was very difficult for young people to make any place in their life for private prayer. You could hardly expect them to indulge in a practice which had been labelled 'incompatible' for modern man. So their zeal for Christ and christianity found expression in political interest and action, not in prayer.

That was in the late 1960s. Much has happened in catholicism since then, notably a realization that politics is not the whole gospel, together with a growing desire among people of all ages to know more about prayer and to practise it in their lives. The pendulum has swung, and youth chaplains now

find that their young people are extremely interested in prayer and want to delve into it deeply. Where it was all politics in the last decade, now it seems to be all prayer. The opportunities for us all to help young people to pray are huge. Provided we remember those four points about informality, friendship, community and radical longings, we should be able to introduce many to the life of prayer. I wonder if the ground has ever been so ready and prepared for sowing?

If you think of prayer as the door through which we enter into God's presence, there are many such entries.

i) *Petition.* For many people this is the way they begin to pray. They find themselves really wanting something and turn to God almost for the first time as a real person and ask him for what they want. They pray with an intensity which makes them treat God as real, in a way which makes all their previous participation in intercessory formulas seem to be mere lip service. The intensity of their desire (somebody sick, a vital interview, recognition from a loved one) makes them break through into a real relationship with God. It is good to encourage this sort of praying, and to follow it up with encouragement to thank God later. Thanksgiving is a more expansive prayer than petition and can lead to praise, adoration, contemplation.

ii) *The Bible.* This is one of the oldest ways of praying, none the less popular today for being traditional. The following description from the autobiography of Dr W. E. Orchard of his nonconformist grandfather shows how bible study can lead to deep contemplation:

When he came home from work, after his meal, he shaved, dressed himself more carefully, and then settled down to the bible, set under the lamp on the table before him. When the book had been opened at the proper place, his spectacles had to be carefully polished, to the accompaniment of anticipatory sighs over the treasures he was about to explore. The spectacles being then as carefully adjusted, a verse was slowly read, half aloud to himself. Deeper sighs then followed, perhaps accompanied by the exclamation 'This blessed book!' Further reflection would bring forth joyful tears, which meant that the spectacles had to be wiped again; and so on, but always with the same deliberation. A visiting minister used to tell how, coming in upon him one evening during these pious exercises, he enquired what was giving him such evident joy, and was told that it was the 8th of Romans: 'I have been on it all week', he explained. 'And how far have you got?' 'The 5th verse', was the reply; 'and this was Thursday night!'

iii) *The psalms.* Of all the books in the bible, the psalms lend themselves to prayer best because they are prayers. In spite of their apparent out-of-dateness, references to Gilead, Manasseh, the Valley of Succoth, and so on, they are in fact completely contemporary. They deal with the reactions of the human heart to the ups and downs, grandeurs and miseries of life. In doing so they furnish proof that the human heart has not changed at all

since their day. We can make our own all the sentiments expressed in the psalms, even the curses, for after all, are not psychologists today showing us the wisdom of being authentically ourselves and not repressing our worst feelings? The modern quest for honesty (a passionate quest in the case of young people) finds a satisfying fulfilment in the prayers of the psalmist:

Awake, O Lord, why do you sleep?
 Arise, do not reject us for ever!
 Why do you hide your face
 and forget our oppression and misery?

is a prayer that all of us have made from time to time. So also is this one:

Your will is wonderful indeed; therefore I obey it.

It is not necessary when praying the psalms privately to get to the end of each one. It is often more helpful to choose a few sentiments which one can make one's own and dwell on them slowly. In this way one can build up a treasury of short phrases which at one time or another have matched one's personal experience. These phrases can accompany one on bus journeys, queueing in supermarkets, waiting for a friend to turn up.

iv) *Prayer of life.* Praying from the scriptures is a process of starting with the word of God and then applying it to one's situation in life. Another form of prayer is to 'start at the other end', namely to begin with a situation in life, and then to pray one's way through that till one reaches God. From life to God rather than from God to life. The most brilliant exponent of this form of prayer is Michel Quoist. His 'Prayers of Life' were, surely, one of the most significant milestones in the history of twentieth century spirituality. They have spread all over the world. What priest, nun, chaplain, teacher, youth leader has not used them in one form or another to animate retreats, vigils, masses, discussion groups? Quoist opened up a vital stream in modern spirituality which expressed all the modern yearnings about God in simple and compelling prayers. These were the yearnings to bring God into everyday situations or rather to find him there, to take him out of the sacristy into the factories, streets, playgrounds, homes of ordinary people, to desacralize and make ordinary our contacts with God who is our 'Father' as well as 'almighty, everlasting God'. There have been many imitators of Quoist since 1963, none of them quite so good but all testifying to the spiritual helpfulness of prayer of this kind, which begins with five-pound notes, pornographic magazines, being jilted in love, and goes on to discover God in the real world. These are prayers which are quintessentially 'informal, friendly, communal'. In helping people to use them, it is good to encourage them to go a stage further and make up their own prayers of life. The results will not be as good as Quoist, but for the person himself they will form a collection of genuine prayers which means everything. The only rule here is that one must start with a genuine emotion ('O God, I feel lousy tonight') and not a simulated one ('I would rather die than offend thee'). By definition a prayer

of life starts where one is, not where one wants to be. Its aim is to help one make the journey from the former to the latter.

v) *Our Father*. There is a potentiality, more or less buried, in us all for contemplation. Sooner or later the wise man will want to activate this. All christians are baptized into familiar relationship with God. They miss a great treasure when they fail to aspire to exercise this baptismal privilege. St Paul describes the work of the holy Spirit, given in baptism, precisely in terms of simple prayer. In us the Spirit says 'Abba' to the Father (Rom 8, 15 and Gal 4, 6). This is the charter for universal contemplation among the baptized. A good way to learn to contemplate is to say the Our Father slowly, pausing between each phrase to let the meaning sink in, in no hurry to get to the end. This allows the pause between each phrase to become a really meaningful silence; and after practice, one's prayer passes from being a series of phrases with silence in between to being a prayer of silence kept alive by phrases. Contemplation begins when we begin to pray silently, without words or discourse, just dwelling on the thought of God, or rather on God himself. At first, silence in prayer is threatening to many people, but this fear can be overcome by developing a lively trust in God our Father. This lively trust in the Father is precisely what contemplative prayer is: the Spirit in our hearts saying 'Abba, Father!' With groups of young people I set up the following experiment: We say the Our Father together and note that it takes us fifteen seconds. Then I ask them to go apart singly and pray the Our Father, and take fifteen minutes to say it once. When we meet again for 'feedback', after fifteen minutes, there are always some who report that they were 'lost' most of the quarter of an hour. But there never fail to be others who have found the silent pauses they have been forced to make between the phrases surprisingly fruitful, and have discovered the value of silent prayer for the first time in their lives. These can be helped to make such prayer part of their daily programme, and so grow into contemplative prayer. This experiment can be done with any christian formula, but the words of the Lord's Prayer seem to contain everything necessary as a point of departure in contemplation.

vi) *The Jesus Prayer*. In the experiment above, one encourages people to pray 'beneath the level' of words by setting up periods of silence between the separate phrases of a formula. The Jesus Prayer has a similar end in view, but effects it in a different way. You take the formula 'Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner' (cf Lk 18, 13), and during your period of prayer repeat it as often as you like. Usually what happens is that you begin by repeating the phrase a good number of times, but soon you slip into a rhythm of saying it less but 'meaning' it more between stretches of silence. Sometimes you reach the stage when the single word 'Jesus' is said and found to be sufficient to maintain a deep contact with God. You do not want many words, just the occasional repetition of the holy name. As with the Our Father, you find that the words of a formula have been used to lead into a deep silence which is charged with the presence of God.

The journey inward

Recently I was asked to address a group on the subject of prayer. Instead of giving a talk, I invited the sixty persons present to come with me in silence on the journey inward for twenty minutes. I guided them on this and then invited questions. Later I heard that I had been criticized by one or two middle-aged ladies for expecting too much from my audience, by plunging them into silent prayer instead of explaining about it beforehand. Their argument was that people, especially young people, need a prudent and gentle introduction to contemplation. But I also heard that some fifteen working-class teenagers from a comprehensive school, who were present, had been much attracted by the journey inward and had been practising it on their own since. This story underlines what I believe to be true: that young people, just because they are friendly and informal by nature, take readily to the friendly and informal prayer which we call contemplation; but are easily switched off by the prudent and gentle approach which expects little from them and imprisons their initial efforts in excessive structure.

The journey inward is based on the truth that by baptism we have the holy Spirit dwelling in the depths of our being, praying night and day 'with sighs too deep for words' (Rom 8, 26). Our prayer, then, need not be complicated. It should be very simple: a question of tuning in to that ceaseless prayer which is going on in the depth of our being. To do this all one has to do is to enter into oneself. This is what Dag Hammarskjöld called going on the journey inward.

The first stage consists in setting the scene with a few preliminary preparations. They can be schematized thus:

Close or lower the eyes
 Sit upright with a straight spine
 Let the mind be where the body is: here!
 Let go all plans, worries – Release!
 Wait on God, passive and expectant
 Let God carry you.

When this preliminary stillness has been achieved you travel down inside you. It is helpful to do so with words of one syllable – for instance:

God within
 God here
 God now
 God is
 GOD
 Ground of being
 Let go!
 Sink and Merge
 Union!

By now all you are doing is breathing. So it is useful to latch your prayer on to this single activity. At the same time it is good to make your breathing slow and deep, with long pauses at the inhaled and exhaled states. Then you can attach single aspirations to these activities:

Breathe in – 'Jesus'
Breathe out – 'Spirit'
Exhaled – 'One'

You can remain as long as desired with this trinitarian formula, deeply at one with God within.

You finish by opening your eyes to view the world about you, remembering that you meet the same God there whom you have been communing with in the depths of your being.

The important thing in this inward prayer is not the formula I have outlined, but the experience itself. Everyone will have his own approach. The more it is practised, the less structure will be required; the preliminary stages will be short and quick, and the body of the prayer will be soon reached and prolonged, even to a matter of hours, not minutes. The beauty of the prayer is its flexibility – it can be practised for two minutes at a bus stop or two hours in one's room. It requires no special place or special time or special apparatus. It is merely making the most of the great gift already given to us in baptism: union with the Trinity in the depths of our souls. The wonder is not that some people pray for hours on end, but that so few of us do, when one thinks of the ineffable treasure we have within us.

For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we say 'Abba! Father', it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God . . . Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (Rom 8, 15. 26-27).

Take those words seriously, and you will be forever going on the Journey Inward, and then coming back to the Journey Outward to renew the face of the earth.

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