

APOSTOLIC CONTEMPLATION

INWARDNESS FOR THE OUTGOING

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Perhaps, on seeing the mystic motionless, crucified, or in prayer, some may think his activity has fallen asleep or that it has left the earth. Not so. Nothing lives or acts on the world more intensely than purity and prayer. These stretch like an inviolable light between the universe and God. Through their serene transparency rises the creative tide, laden with natural power and with grace. What else is the virgin Mary?¹

THE CHARISM for now is communication leading to communion and made visible in community. The movement begins from within and reaches out. We have a need that must be filled; we must fill a need in others. We communicate, and communion comes about on varied levels. Communion with the Trinity through grace, with Christ's body in the eucharist, with the members of his body by service: all these are one communion, a holy communion. When lived with constancy it forms community; the outward movement circles back to its sources within, holding the many in one, making one of many. The hour has come for an at-one-ment of prayer and service, of love-in-contemplation and of contemplation-in-doing. The Church now calls for this outgoing on the part of those whose deepest life is lived within.

We have long called the apostolate the overflow of prayer. Are we now to learn, in this day of the open window, of the unclosed door, that service begins before the overflow; that it is already at work in the walled garden of silence; that the hours of aloneness are really hours of togetherness? Conversely, we may learn by the same insight that silence is not broken by speech, nor the still gaze diverted by action, when the movement rises from within. Are we about to find that the crucifying tension between silent contemplation and activity that speaks is resolved by a prayer so inward that it possesses the whole of life, a prayer that nothing from without can stop? If we courageously withdraw to prayer while human needs clamour for us, we may find that our service begins while we linger at the sources

¹ Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre, *Hymne de l'Univers* (Paris, 1961), p 167.

of love, inactive for a time. Is this the meaning of Christ's heart?

The apostolate rises in God himself, in 'the Father's Word breathing Love'; it takes human form in the heart of the Son of Man.¹ By whom is the person in need first loved if not by God through whose long creative act he came into being? By whose care is he more encompassed than by that of Christ who labours and dies for him through his sacraments and through his members? How best can one man serve another than by yielding to the Spirit of love working through him, in a home, a school or an office, and in the streets or on an airliner? Prayer is the means, and prayer begins (but does not end) within.

Prayer is contact. Just as one person must in some way touch another for communication, so God touches each person in prayer. And each person drops his own plumb-line straight into God. Each in his deepest selfhood responds to the contact singly. Prayer begins with a person-to-Person call; one Person is always aware of presence; the other has only to become so and contact is made. When awareness of presence is mutual, then truth can shine, love can attract, life can quicken. Then matter is transfigured, personalities unfold and share. A moment of attention, of surrender, and all is – for that moment – well. Prolong that moment and the apostolate stirs into action. It takes effect – communication, communion, community. God touches each through the other. Contact transmits the current, till those who have not prayed are drawn into it.

We are always free to go back to the beginning, to where the current rises, to the Trinity. And the beginning always *is*. 'In the beginning was the Word', and the Word is spoken now. 'And the Word was with God',¹ is with God; their 'witness' is the holy Spirit. To say 'God' is to say 'Threeness-in-Oneness', for God's being is communication of Persons, eternally now. If human prayer is the lifting of the mind and heart to God, the prayer of God is his self-knowledge and self-love. It is Being-Knowledge-Love in mutual selfgiving; it is Father, Son and Spirit interliving. The prayer of God is the first inwardness, and in that divine community all is shared.

In Christ, his triune life in eternity is co-existent with his mortal life lived years ago on earth and with his life in his members now. As man, Christ lived by that prayer of God; for this he went into the mountain, and spent the whole night in it, and in the morning was

¹ Jn I, 1.

found among men to give them all that he had. He gives us his way of prayer, drawn from its source by his own inwardness.

If in the Trinity life and prayer are one thing, so here and now life and prayer are one when the Word who is God is found indwelling in human beings. In a community each person is called to live with every other as the divine Persons live with each other, in a unity of self-giving. Human contact is prayer when it is drawn from the life of the divine community in the present moment. The springs that rose in the beginning are flowing now. One cannot drink water from afar; one's lips must touch it. One cannot pray apart from the sources of prayer. To go to them alone in one's thirst is to find our neighbour already drinking, sharing the waters in the silence that goes before speech – in inwardness.

The trinitarian prayer-life, or life-prayer, reaches out in the unfolding act of creation. Even now God is creating the heavens and the earth: the world and its story are evolving. A thought of God comes into being, distinct from him but not apart from him. It becomes 'us', and we, by a corresponding creaturely prayer, make contact with the Creator in the creation of which we are a part. Contact with creation is, in itself, prayer. God saw that it was good, each thing as he made it. He saw its potentiality to evolve into his ultimate thought for it. To see that creation is good is to see it through the Creator's eyes. To tell him our delight is to shape chaos into ordered beauty by the prayer of praise.

This prayer is easy when our contact is with God's fresh creation. It takes courage to pray thus when we see that what was made good is no longer so. God's exultation in his own handiwork (echoed lately by men within the orbit of the moon as they looked at 'the good earth') rings through Genesis before the fall of man. Christ saw the world after the fall. He, the first-born of creatures, their Alpha and Omega, saw the lilies as gloriously clothed, and watched his Father caring for the birds. He prayed: 'Father I give thee thanks', even though, as the Son of Man, he knew what is in man. He knew that his brothers could spoil the flowers, kill the birds, and leave themselves desolate, and still he prayed the prayer of praise.

Every man sent as an apostle joins in it or fails in his creaturely being at its source. He prays it for those whose eyes are too tear-blinded and dust-filled to see that creation is still unfolding. This prayer is Eden-like, sensitive and silent. It is contemplative because it must watch before it speaks; it is apostolic because it communicates joy.

If prayer is hard it is because the contact has been broken. In the beginning the demonic 'I will not serve' was followed by the human 'I heard your voice and was afraid', when God called: 'Adam, where are you?' The walks with God in the evening air were broken off; the hiding-away numbed into forgetfulness, into a wandering after other voices. Sin causes dumbness, powerlessness to communicate, unawareness of presence: a life without prayer, commensurate to a life without love of our fellows. But the estrangement is one-sided. God has not walked off nor turned his eyes away; his attention holds us like two hands.

The contact is remade. The enfleshment of God took place when a trinitarian prayer met with a full response in a human prayer. The triune God so loved the world that the Father spoke his word to it through their mutual Love. The meeting place was Mary's virginity. When she had said: 'Be it done to me', the Father could say to a human being: 'You are my son; this day I have begotten you'.¹ From then on theandric prayer has joined God and man. Its source in each human being is the inward listening and yielding that establishes presence. In prayer we encounter 'what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have handled, the Word of Life'.² Then love goes out, and we show to others what we have met in prayer, and find in them a presence that we recognize.

When this becomes habitual the Christ-life is made visible in the contemporary world; the Christ-prayer is prayed in his membership. It begins in the hidden life made up of habitual moments: eating, sleeping, walking to where one must be, talking to those met on the way. It has times of waiting, when there is no-one to talk to. It is Nazareth. The young Christ told his secret of what to do with the hours of a normal day, when he stayed in the temple. He was always about his Father's business, conscious of the Person with whom he was one in the love of a Third. The inner presence radiated for all to see: 'And Jesus advanced in wisdom and age and grace before God and men'.³ Witness to prayer was his form of service in ordinary life. He has never ceased from this witness. Whenever anyone is Presence-conscious while working, playing, talking or doing nothing, what goes on within is manifest in the daylight. Serenity and joy betray it.

At Christ's baptism, while he was in prayer, the Father and the

¹ Ps 2, 7.

² 1 Jn 1, 1.

³ Lk 2, 52.

Spirit gave witness through the voice and the dove. The contact was made audible, visible. Then the Spirit drove him into deeper prayer, in the desert. He lived in a long silence; he was hungry and tempted. In his aloneness he entered more profoundly into the human condition. He returned from the desert, having overcome, only to be driven by the Spirit to go about doing good. His work was at-onement, to draw others into his communication with his Father. For this he formed his fellowships: he was the son in his home, the friend among his own, the teacher of his disciples, the shepherd of the multitude. He was closest to the apostles. He set up communication through contact. He knew them already and they loved him at first sight, but a long time passed before they could think as he thought, love as he loved.

The learning of his thoughts and desires is prayer. It is to us what companionship with him was to those first followers. They prayed by being with him; we are with him by prayer. The thoughts and desires of the people around us are a meeting ground with him, a place of prayer. 'Teach us to pray'. The answer is 'Our Father', asking that the earthly community be like the heavenly one; that now the divine thought be realized, the divine wish satisfied.

Christ set up a rhythm for times of prayer, a balance between speech and silence. He would spend whole nights on the mountain overlooking the world, then go down into the thick of things. There is urgency in his flights into aloneness, leaving the many for the one in a place apart. When his humanity thus confronted divinity, all its powers were drawn to the point of contact, vivified, intensified. In the singleness of union he encountered all others who share his human nature. 'For them do I sanctify myself . . . that they all may be one'.¹ When in the pressures of daily living we take time for this lonely prayer of his, we find that the emptiness is peopled with those for whom he and we are praying. Then those who eat and work by our side will receive the power that goes out from him.

The fellowship thus formed leads straight into sacrifice; it demands a life-time's death in love. The weariness of struggle, the tension of time pulling against too-much-to-do, the let-down of failure, the twist of doubt tightening on faith, are all part of the fair price of sharing in the light and life. The price cannot be payed without prayer, as Christ learned under the olive trees. It was the hour of darkness experienced by the light. Stretched and energized by

¹ Jn 17, 19-21.

Fiat, love goes under the surface of human anguish; it feels the rending of the fellowship, the estrangement from God. Prayer, the lifting of the mind and heart, is also the plunging of the mind and heart into the night. The 'anointing of the holy One' strengthens the Son in his wrestling with the Father for his brothers. The agony (or simply the drabness) of prayer at such hours becomes a ransom. It is an inward experience, most deeply felt by those who withdraw under the olive trees.

'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit'.¹ The giving-over of one's being into God's hands in prayer is death-in-love. Prayer must go on: in noise, confusion, distraction, pain, as in peace and silence; in the withdrawal of God as in his presence. Prayer is crucifixion, made explicit in the daily eucharist carried on in remembrance of him. And when death has happened, when the emptiness feels final and failure complete, then the sign of new life is given. Blood and water flow from a dead heart. This is the hour of the birth of the Church into today's world, into each man's life – with blood and water. 'Let him drink who believes in me', rivers of life for the earth's dry face: 'and this he said of the Spirit'.²

When this prayer that is crucifixion 'draws waters with joy from the Saviour's fountains',³ it becomes resurrection. Through the door closed by fear Christ comes into the fellowship, holding joy in his wounded hands as he gives us our trinitarian mission: 'As the Father has sent me I also send you'.⁴ He breathes, and his breath is his Spirit: 'Peace be to you'. Ascending, the Word-made-flesh became what he was from the beginning, the Word who is God. The place at the Father's right hand where he stands 'as one slain',⁵ is in our own confused world; 'he is not far from any of us'.⁶ He is present as one withdrawn into the invisibility of faith; the seeking heart withdraws to find him.

The withdrawal leads into the cenacle behind closed doors, into a vibrant recollection. It calls many together. The Church springs to life in the pentecostal fire and wind that come upon those who 'persevere together in prayer'.⁷ He is 'with us all days',⁸ in our daily bread from heaven. For Christ, communion means giving himself away, his body to ours; he is consumed by the human condition. For us, day-long communion is the prolongation of his sacramental

¹ Lk 24, 46.

⁴ Jn 20, 22.

⁷ Acts 1, 14.

² Jn 7, 38–39.

⁵ Apoc 5, 6.

⁸ Mk 28, 20.

³ Isai 12, 3.

⁶ Acts 18, 28.

presence into the humanity of those around us. What begins in a silent meeting, in an intermingling, becomes the shared meal, the joy of social life, the talk of the kingdom that shows that he is alive again. Each of us can be to the other 'the sweetness of every taste'. by sharing: each can find the same in every other by openness. The effective word, 'This is my body', builds up the widening body of the Church. Life flows in activity, in communication, but the life-process itself is silent. It is prayer.

Perhaps the mystery that best reveals the outward power of inwardness is the transfiguration. Christ went into the mountain to spend himself in the prayer of God, and took his friends with him. While he prayed the Father spoke, the Spirit shone, and his friends found that 'it is good to be here'.¹ Clothed in the beauty of the bright cloud he spoke of his death. Peter never forgot what had happened 'when we were with him on the holy mount'.² Thabor is an easy entry into the trinitarian prayer of the God-man. Those who stay with him in joy will be strong to go with him through his passion into the risen life. It takes courage to stand high and apart, to stand above when the plain is filled with the needy. Perhaps this is the price of union without which we would be only ourselves and not one flesh with God when we come down from the mountain and meet a demoniac boy, recognizing in him the suffering Servant. 'This kind is cast out only by prayer'.³

Christ's humanity, anointed by joy, is radiant. Joy shines with power and is clothed with white purity. It is mindful of the dark, of passion and of death. It walks through these into the sufferings of others, for the sake of the glory to come 'when the day-star shall arise in our hearts'.⁴ Joy irradiates community. When two or three are gathered in his name, daring to be glad, he is in the midst of them and 'it is good to be here'. Heaven-on-earth is meant to be. It comes with prayer, for we ask in the Our Father that God's will be done 'on earth as it is in heaven'. It is realized in the communion with God's presence which is the essence of prayer. In sacramental communion we have contact with a humanity which is already living within the ultimate vision. In our communion with our fellow men we have contact with humanity in movement towards the ultimate vision. The chastity that prayer brings about is the closest approach to that vision here on earth: 'Blessed are the clean heart for they shall see God'. What else is the virgin Mary?

¹ Mt 17, 4.

² 2 Pet 2, 18.

³ Mt 17, 20.

⁴ 2 Pet 2, 20.