PRAYER IN THE SECULAR INSTITUTES

By EMILIO TRESALTI

A FEW YEARS AGO, some young men made the acquaintance of our Institute. They wanted to find out whether our way of life would give them what they needed.

They were very taken with our basic ideas and particularly with our secularity – the way we emphasized temporal commitment; but they felt that there was a contradiction in our taking prayer as a serious obligation. A minimum of two hours' daily prayer seemed to them a positive limitation in lives seriously committed to redeeming the secular.

From time to time similar objections have arisen in my own mind with regard to the dedicated christian life in the world and its reluctance to be pulled away from the task of building the earthly city. It is then that I ask myself: to live a christian life in the world, is prayer necessary? Or, is it necessary in a christian life dedicated by a special consecration? Or even, is it possible in our times for a layman to pray at all? In the proper distribution of functions and services in the Church, it is surely the specific task of monks and religious in general to devote themselves to a prayer which alone is worthy of the name – prayer not merely said, but 'prayed': and this should suffice?

If we are to find an answer to these questions, we must begin, I think, with one more basic: what *is* prayer? And the immediate answer is: prayer is loving converse with God. It is as his creatures, as his saved, that God speaks to us: he begins the conversation, and we cannot, must not withdraw from it. To do so would be against the logic of love.

Thoughts, words, looks, attention, presence, concentration: all these are means by which, on our side, the conversation can proceed. Praise, thanksgiving, offering, petition, reparation for our faults: all these are the subjects of our colloquy.

St John Damascene gives us a definition of prayer which has found its way into our catechisms: 'Prayer is the raising of the mind

to God'.[1] It is a rich expression, but by no means exhaustive. The greatness of prayer, its inner reality, is not simply the raising of the mind to God; the most wonderful thing about it is that it is a true meeting with God. It is not just our thoughts that reach him; we ourselves are really with him. The Lord truly comes down to us, he speaks what he has to say to us, and, when we answer, he speaks to us again.

A more complete definition of prayer would seem to be that of St Augustine: 'Your prayer is a conversation with God. In the scriptures, it is God who speaks to you; in prayer it is you who speak to God'.[2] Prayer is not a monologue. It is the word of God and the word of man; it is God's meeting with man in question and answer, in mutual and reciprocal love, in his grace-giving and our co-operation. So prayer is a dialogue, but a dialogue which becomes a sharing in the eternal communication of the Word of God with his Father in the holy Spirit.

In this sense, prayer is certainly the most consummately human activity. It is also the only human activity which stretches into eternity: a colloquy, an encounter of love with and in the blessed Trinity. To be a man of prayer simply means to be a man of God; which is why the christian community has always had, and still has, such reverence for those who make prayer, here and now on this earth, their main activity – the people whom we call contemplatives. Prayer becomes more authentic in proportion as a man grows in union with God, shares in his life and is filled with his holy Spirit. The converse is equally true: the more a man prays the more fully he shares in the divine life.

Prayer is the expression of freedom because it is the expression of love. Love presupposes freedom. We are sons, not slaves; and we have God for our Father. It is he who controls this Father-son relationship, our sharing in his life, the sending of the holy Spirit in us, and whenever we ask. 'Ask and it shall be given to you'.[3] We can, if we wish, wander away from him. He does not force us to stay at home with him. Yet no sooner do we appeal to him than he receives us again with open arms.[4]

If we want his gifts of grace, his loving friendship, we need only ask in faith and he will give them to us, infallibly. One might say that the constant theme of prayer as we find it in the psalms is for

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[1] *De Fide Orthodoxa*, 3, 24.
[2] *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 85.
[3] Mt 7, 11 ff.
[4] Lk 15, 11 ff.

this sense of trust: a confidence and assurance so strong that one begins to thank him before receiving what one is asking for. It is the attitude of Jesus himself,[5] which he imparts to us.[6]

Prayer, then, is necessary if we are to be men in the true and full sense of the word; it is the condition of authentic human growth. In fact, without this real relationship with God, self-fulfilment is impossible. In fact, whenever we reflect on our changeable existence, we soon become aware that we do not have within us the ultimate source of our being. We realize that we have this only in another: that is, we 'have' being, we are not being; and we have it from Being itself. Here is the fundamental mystery of our sharing. All that exists, all beings, receive being from Being itself. To give to a being all its being: this is what creation means. The Being who gives being is, by that very fact, the Creator of the people to whom he gives being. It is because God knows and loves them that creatures begin to be – by his creative will. By loving them, or desiring their good, he brings into being all the goods, the gifts, he wants for them, and in the measure he desires. So Augustine says: 'As for us, we see the things you have made because they exist; but you, it is because you see them that they exist.'[7] 'All his creatures . . . he does not know them because they exist; they exist simply because he knows them'.[8]

To recognize and to acknowledge this constant, profound, basic ontological dependence is, for intelligent and free creatures like ourselves, a joyous and spontaneous acceptance of God and of oneself in the same movement: acceptance of the ultimate reality of creaturehood, possessed in the Creator and from his hand, whereby the creature is closer to him than to itself.

> O God, you are my God, for you I long;
> for you my soul is thirsting.
> My body pines for you like a dry,
> weary land without water.[9]

Thus it is that my colloquy of love with God is an intrinsic part of my creaturehood, and my true position in this freely accepted relationship with God is a condition of my authentic being as a man; all real human growth depends on it. I am made for God, and I am never fully myself except in him. And yet my relationship with him

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[5] Cf Jn 11, 41 ff.
[6] Cf Lk 11, 9–13.
[7] *Confessions*, XIII, 38, 53.
[8] *De Trinitate* XV, 13.
[9] Ps 62, 1.

has freedom for its context; which means that I must want him, seek him out. I must seek his face,[10] in order to find my own. Prayer is therefore a condition of my very humanity, as well as of my christian existence: 'Without me you can do nothing'.[11] It is also the condition of my consecrated being, of my growth in God, of my holiness.

None of this can I achieve by my own strength; there is nothing in me that can give me of his life. I must ask for it. If I am to have it, I must pray for it. There is nothing in me that can lift me up into this Trinitarian existence; yet it can be mine, easily, if I will ask for it humbly, trustingly, insistently. Of myself, I do not even know how to speak; I cannot even say the name Jesus, unless the power is given me. Of myself I cannot say, 'Father'. It is the Spirit who speaks it in me. Yet I must have the Spirit in me. I must pray: 'Come, holy Spirit'.

Prayer, then, is the indispensable condition of life for every human being, every christian, whether lay or clerical, secular or religious.

In answering the first question, 'what is prayer?', I have shown, I think, that it is a basic necessity for every human being, man or woman. I still have to answer the other questions posed at the beginning of this article. What about my relationship with the world, my commitment to the temporal? Must it not be said that the relationship with God such as I have outlined above, and the consequent necessity of prayer, will have an alienating effect on my relations with men, with material things, with the task of building the earthly city? No. Because before all else I am in the world because God has put me there. I am involved in its building, in its growth, because of his explicit command:

> God blessed them, and God said to them: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'.[12]

Who benefits by this growth of the world? I do. Man is for me; mankind is for me. I cannot isolate myself from others, because I am accountable for others. It is forbidden to me to reply as did Cain: 'Am I my brother's keeper?'[13]

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[10] Ps 26, 8–9.
[11] Jn 15, 5.
[12] Gen 1, 28.
[13] Gen 4, 9.

The problem is that because of original sin the building of the earthly city, the development of humankind, mutual help, the elimination of injustice – all this has become extremely difficult. It is enough to read the account in Genesis of the diaspora and the building of the tower of Babel:

> Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad on the face of the whole earth'. And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. And the Lord said, 'Behold they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech'.[14]

Building up, progress, demands of man, historically speaking, a setting of himself to rights, which will make him, in turn, capable of setting to rights his relationship with other men and with all created things. An absolute autonomy in the temporal order means in fact an inability in man to order means to his proper end, if one prescinds from his relationship to God. Without the supernatural, nature is no longer capable, in practice, of being itself. Historically speaking, man is truly man only if he is sharing in the divine life. He is certainly capable of achieving exceptional results technically, but they are only partial: they are immediately used to destroy rather than to build, to enslave rather than to set free. This is the way of it, as a brief reflection on the current state of the world reveals – the problems of the third world, hunger etc. – particularly when we compare it with the biblical story cited above. To establish order and justice – and this is the specific task of the laity, to achieve, that is, true peace, one needs a working accord with God, to be set in order by his order.

It would be well to pause here to ask what we mean by 'laity'. There is a good descriptive definition of the nature and mission of the laity in Vatican II's dogmatic constitution on the Church:

> By the term laity is meant all Christ's faithful except those in holy orders and in the religious state approved by the Church: that is, those who have been made one body with Christ in baptism and constitute God's people; who share, each in his own measure, the

[14] Gen 11, 4–7.

> priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ; who play their proper role in fulfilling the mission of the whole christian people in the Church and in the world.[15]

In this first part of the conciliar definition we find the laity given its place within the ecclesial body. But more germane to our argument is what follows:

> What is special and peculiar to the laity is their secular character. For while it is true that those in sacred orders can sometimes engage in secular activities and even follow a profession proper to the world, it still remains that by their own particular vocation they are chiefly and properly ordained for the sacred ministry; and religious, by their state of life, give singular and striking witness to the truth that the world cannot be transformed and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes.[16]

Here we have a precise distribution of functions and ministries within the body of the Church. Let us see what is specific to the laity:

> It is, however, the special task of the laity and proper to their vocation to seek God's kingdom by engaging in temporal affairs and bringing his order to them.[17]

This highly important declaration specifies the true commitment of the laity in the Church and in the world. In the Church, because it is a question of seeking the kingdom of God; in the world, because by engaging in temporal affairs and bringing God's order to them, we are immediately involved in what Pius XII called, in his famous allocution to the second World Congress of the Apostolate of the Laity, 'consecration of the world'.

The final section of the conciliar definition reads:

> They live in the world: that is, they are caught up in each and every worldly occupation and employment, in the normal conditions of family and society, which form the very warp and woof of their life and existence. It is there that they are called by God, to follow out their ordinary tasks according to the spirit of the gospel and so to act as the leaven from within for the sanctification of the world. In this way, before all else, they manifest Christ to others by the example of their lives and by the shining witness of their faith, hope and love.[18]

None of this is possible without prayer. In fact, if the lay person wishes to be seriously involved in the world and for the world, then he *must* pray.

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[15] *Lumen Gentium*, 31. [16] *Ibid.* [17] *Ibid.* [18] *Ibid.*

Perhaps so far we are all in complete accord. The problem arises when we turn from prayer in general to prayers or to the 'amount' of prayer. The word itself has an ugly ring. How can one speak of quantity with regard to prayer or colloquy of love or the love of God? Our whole life should become prayer; work itself should be transformed into prayer; the whole of our lives should become a loving colloquy with God. We do not operate on artificial divisions and dissections. An authentic christian life is a continual prayer. Jesus says it in the gospel: 'Pray without ceasing'.[19] And St Paul adds: 'Whether you eat or drink, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus'.[20]

However, it must be said at once that a life transformed in prayer is not a starting-point; it is the winning-post. Further, only prayer pure and absolute can nourish such a life. If our existence is to be a continous and spontaneous prayer, this can only come about through repeated acts of prayer. In other words, there must be times when one prays. The experience of the saints – of eastern and western church alike – says so. And even when one reaches a certain degree of fusion between prayer and life, a certain point in which the loving colloquy with God happens in the midst of activity and at the most distracting times, moments of absolute prayer are equally necessary; for it is these that feed the course of continual prayer, our dialogue with the Father. And besides, love itself demands moments of love – absolutely, without anything else intervening: moments given over entirely to direct contact.

And not only this: there are contingencies and situations cropping up in my life when I absolutely need to ask for help, because I can keep going no longer. This is the prayer which tests and proves (as the psalms show us): the trials of solitude, of the noise of the crowd, of war without and within; trials of body and of spirit. And finally there are faults – offences against God; my own and those of others, which compel me to ask for pardon, to make reparation. This is why it is necessary – and I repeat, necessary, if our lives as children of God are real, that there should be definite moments of prayer, periods of time, that is, when we enter into a conscious, sought, willed conversation with God. If prayer is an exigency of our condition as creatures, of our history as redeemed sinners; if it is a *sine qua non* of a full and efficacious work in the world; if, in a certain sense, it is a connatural activity, then it is equally true that the will to pray

[19] Cf Lk 18, 1.

[20] 1 Cor 10, 31.

is extremely flabby and fluctuating, subject to all the ups and downs of moods and feelings.

And yet the demands of love are much more profound; we cannot leave our prayer to be at the mercy of our feelings. We need to be convinced about it, and to put up with the consequences. There must be a place for prayer in our lives – the first place. The first place, certainly, in our intentions, since we cannot live as christians without it; and also in practice, if our day is well organized. There must be a set period of prayer; and the experience of the Church, and of life in secular Institutes, has tended to set the time at about two hours. Some feel it artificial to determine a length of time for prayer; yet we have to remember that we are not pure spirits. We live in space and time; and we need space and time if we are to develop and to grow, even in union with God. The Word of God became flesh, he took on the dimensions of space and time.

Is this possible in practice? I am certain that it is. There are many men and women to my knowledge who lead wholly secular lives and truly pray. What we have to do is to achieve a vital synthesis of prayer and temporal commitment. It takes time and effort; but the Spirit of the Lord 'at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think'.[21]

If we are to achieve all this in our lives in the world, our day needs to be well organized. It is obviously impossible that the same horarium will suit everyone; but we need to be convinced, by our own experience as well as by faith, that we can achieve a synthesis. Each one in his own circumstances must be able to impose a rule of life on himself – though this must always be flexible. It will depend to a large extent on the type of work one does. Some have a very regular work-schedule; and for these it is relatively easy to draw up an horarium of various times of prayer through the day. Others have to make space for the unforeseen. In these cases it is necessary to separate off the 'safe' times, for example, in the morning before starting work. Others, those on shift-work for example, will need an extremely flexible prayer-rule, one adapted to a frequently changing programme. There are other situations in which times of prayer will have to be distributed across the whole week rather than a single day. (We are not saying, of course, that there will be no prayer at all in a particular day; rather that it will be reduced to an indispensable minimum and found again in its fulness on a Sunday or some other

[21] Eph 3, 20.

suitable day.) Experience shows that such a weekly horarium of prayer applies only to special cases and should be no more than a temporary device, since it is very difficult to maintain a rhythm of this sort without detriment to the life of prayer.

There is also the problem of finding stable moments of prayer, such as the Mass, which do not depend simply on our own good will. In places where the catholic community is numerous, it is not difficult to share in the eucharistic liturgy every day. In other places, it is. Here we are governed by circumstances. What is important is that we do have a rule, no matter how flexible or personal. We cannot leave our times of prayer to chance; if we do, they will inevitably become less frequent. Besides the liturgy, great importance must be attached to meditation on the word of God. Here again, practical living experience is our guide: if this kind of prayer is to be authentic, it needs at least half an hour.

There are two characteristic aspects of secular prayer. One is the content of the prayer itself; the other is the exercise of purifying the intention. With regard to content, the prayer of praise will draw its inspiration from all that rings true, all that is lovely[22] in the experience and encounter of our everyday life and work, from the beauties of nature to the fruits of science and technology which reveal man's intelligence and creative ability: the artist and scientist, our next-door neighbour and his friendliness, our work-mates with the sense of solidarity and good example that they give us, the joyousness of children as they come home from school, and so on; all this provides us with the opportunity for praise and thanksgiving in our prayer.

Our work, our weariness, the monotony of the daily round, joys and tears – our neighbours' as well as our own: all these afford the occasion for the prayer of offering, which has its culmination in the offertory of the Mass. Here we renew our offering of self along with the bread and wine, because all these things are consecrated and transformed in us and with us into the body and blood of Christ, as we find our oneness with him in communion.

The needs of the world, the little world about us – of the family in the next apartment, of the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker; the needs of mankind, of people who have not even enough to live a human life, where material hunger and thirst is matched by their need of education, culture or justice: all this will arouse in us that deep sympathy which drives us to the prayer of petition, to ask our

[22] Cf Phil 4, 8.

Father in heaven for bread, pardon and peace.

Then there is the sinfulness of every sort surrounding us. From time to time it touches us deeply; and as we experience it, we share the gift of those who are enabled 'to complete what is still lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, the Church'.[23]

But the dominant theme of secular prayer will be that of presence to God, of turning to him for that constant adjustment of the course of our intention – a sort of minute-to-minute 'instrumental flying'. So God is at the head of our thinking, the motive of all that we do or say, at the centre of our lives. This is a fundamental of our prayer, which will certainly find in Mass and meditation its substance and nourishment; but from this dual centre prayer will flow out into the whole of our day, the whole of our lives. Here is the double inspiration of the two forms of prayer common to every christian: the prayer of solitude (but which is one with the whole) and community prayer, both of which are valid for secular Institutes even though these have their own particular approach. We must be able to pray anywhere and everywhere – and this stresses an important aspect of the formation proper to secular Institutes. This applies to the prayer of solitude, which Jesus himself recommends,[24] and at the same time to the ability to recollect ourselves (and Jesus himself is our example) not only in our own room – if we have one – but also in the middle of a crowded city, in the breaks during work at the office, in the factory, the hospital and so forth.

Our typical community prayer is not that of the community of the Institute. We should expect to find, in the ambit of the Institute, moments of prayer in common. These are necessary; they ground and strengthen our common vocation. But we have to know how to create community in our place of work, our social situation – wherever our apostolate takes us. In addition, we must share and give life to the prayer of the community to which we belong in the Church and in the world – the community of the parish, of the factory floor and so on.

Must one accept the allegation that this sort of commitment to prayer does in fact involve a separation from the world, and that a layman cannot possibly achieve it; that this 'first place in intention', this period of two hours of prayer, prevents the total commitment of oneself to the world? This was the objection we set out to answer. And certainly we must admit that such a prayer-life separates one

[23] Col 1, 24.

[24] Cf Mt 6, 6.

from the world; but only in the sense in which every christian by virtue of his baptism is required to separate himself from the world. Christ has come for the world's salvation, the Church is the world's salvation – the world established in evil. The refashioning of this world is at the heart of God's plan, in order that man might be established in God.

My prayer as a layman, of any layman if you will, conditions me for true work in the world. I set about saving the world in Christ, not by bestowing a blessing on it from outside – a work that is surely necessary, but by working for it under God from within. I can work in this fashion only if I have his life; and I have his life only if I pray. And this prayer is necessary for everyone – the father or mother of a family, young or old, employer or employee, doctor or patient, man or woman; it is necessary for them all if they are to be themselves. How much more necessary then for me who have been consecrated!

And this brings us to a final question: is there a difference between the prayer of a lay member of a secular Institute and that of other lay people? Not from the point of view of the necessity of prayer – for this is common to every form of the christian life. Concerning the content of prayer, and its dominant theme of which we spoke above, I would also say that there is no difference between a member of a secular Institute and other lay folk (though it seems to me that there are differences on this point with regard to the prayer of priests and religious).

One difference might be with regard to quantity and intensity. This is a fact of everyday experience. Apart from the exceptional case, the married state and the maintenance of a high level of prayer and conscious intimacy with God seem to pull in opposite directions. Here, scripture reinforces experience. St Paul counsels husband and wife 'not to refuse one another except for a short time that you may devote yourselves to prayer',[25] the implication being that prayer and a great degree of actual intimacy with God can be very difficult in marriage.

Finally, it must be stressed that, for those of us who consecrate ourselves to God and to men in a special way, there is a particular risk in today's world: that of wanting to be like others in everything – even in sin. But Christ became a man 'like to us in all things, save only sin'. The purpose of incarnation is redemption. May Christ be our teacher.

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[25] I Cor 7, 5.

[26] Heb 4, 15.