

# APOSTOLIC PRAYER

By JAMES WALSH

PERHAPS THE GREATEST single factor effecting change in the vast majority of religious congregations has been the recognition that the external structures of religious life were almost entirely monastic: enclosure (for solitude as well as for separation from the world), uniform habit, the recitation of the divine office in common, heavy emphasis on as complete an exterior silence as possible, as well as a rigid control over all looking and listening (with a view to contemplative solitude and recollection). In the western church, from the time of Augustine until the renaissance, these structures were of the essence of religious life: they identified it. In fact, the christian life was divided into the contemplative and the active: the contemplatives were those who lived within these structures; all other christians were labelled as active, until the reflection of St Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, on the spirit of the new mendicant orders, produced a third category – the ‘mixed life’. But by and large, the ‘actives’ were identified as christians living in the world, whose personal prayer was restricted largely to vocalized (or at least conceptualized) praise or petition. Mental prayer (or contemplation) was the prerogative of those who had left the world for the cloister. Those few who were still ‘in the world’, and at the same time the recipients of contemplative graces, were the exceptions. Their christian obligations prevented them from retiring to a monastery.

Though there was some development away from this rigid distinction between contemplative and active and the total subordination in the scale of christian values of action to contemplation, in the theory of St Thomas on the mixed life, this kind of life was held to be the preserve of ‘prelates and preachers’.<sup>1</sup> When Ignatius Loyola

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<sup>1</sup> The great masters of the spiritual life in the west, Augustine, Gregory and Bernard, all speak of the union of the active and contemplative lives for preachers, as does Thomas in *Summa Theologica* IIa IIae, q. 188, a. 6. Cf Butler, C., O.S.B.: *Western Mysticism* (London, 1951), pp 157 ff. Dom Jean Le Clercq insists that St Thomas does not admit that a life composed of a mélange of action and contemplation makes up a third ‘life’. Cf *Études sur le vocabulaire monastique du moyen âge* (Rome, 1961) p 114, n. 79. But there can be no doubt that Thomas considers that the life of the friar preacher, which is characterized by the *tradere contemplata*, is radically other than the monastic life.

founded his society of Jesus, he won a long and hard-fought battle which exempted the new order from rigid enclosure, choral recitation of divine office, and the wearing of a uniform habit. But in all other externals he adopted the life-style of the religious orders of his time, which were of course monastic. And it was inevitable that the many congregations, particularly of women, that were founded, like his, with specific apostolic objectives, should find themselves subject to a monastic life-style.

Strangely enough, the contemplation which is the *raison-d'être* of this style of life was denied to these apostolic orders and congregations. At first, this was accidental: the training, and particularly the time, needed for a life of contemplative prayer was not compatible with apostolic activity, even when this was done in a monastic milieu. Once, however, it was realized that many earnest religious, even in the apostolic context, would have a penchant for contemplation which could only be satisfied at the expense of their various apostolic works, theologians began to argue that the close following of Christ does not necessarily imply the receipt of contemplative graces, at least of the higher and rarer kind.<sup>2</sup> All conceded the traditional teaching that this closeness to Christ was the hallmark of religious living; what was now being disputed was the equally traditional doctrine that the highest activity for a christian was, in fact, non-activity – the loving contemplation of the Godhead.<sup>3</sup> The new 'active' orders and congregations seemed, therefore, to have inherited the worst of both worlds: the sweetness of contemplation was denied them because of their preoccupation with the apostolate; and, at the same time, they were forced to live according to a discipline whose only aim and object was the sweetness of contemplation.

It would be fair, I think, to say that this anomaly in the theory and practice of religious life and prayer, in post-tridentine times, was only satisfactorily resolved in the second vatican council, through the declaration that every christian, by virtue of his baptism, is called to the holiness of Christ: that is, to follow Christ as closely as possible in his perfect charity.<sup>4</sup> All christians, then, are called to perfect charity according to the measure of the grace granted them; but clearly not all are called to the heights of contemplation.<sup>5</sup> The implication is that christian holiness – closeness to Christ – is not to

<sup>2</sup> Cf De Guibert, J., S.J.: *The Theology of the Spiritual Life* (London, 1954), pp 340–52.

<sup>3</sup> St Thomas, *loc. cit.* q. 182, a. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, ch V.

<sup>5</sup> De Guibert, *loc. cit.* There is no mention of contemplation or contemplative gifts as such in chapter five of *Lumen Gentium*.

be defined in terms of 'prayer-quality', let alone 'prayer-quantity'. But where does the apostolic religious stand with regard to his prayer? It is a sorrowful fact of experience that without a more or less consistent prayer-growth, the spirit grows weary and despondent and looks for its consolation elsewhere. This ultimately means the disappearance in the christian's life of personal solitary prayer, unless it is to become simply an ascetical exercise in patience and suffering endurance. This alternative, which was taken for granted – Hobson's choice – by so many religious of past generations, has, since the council, been definitely rejected, and rightly so. Today's active religious usually opts either for horizontalism (which may be described more picturesquely and less harshly as the Abou ben Adhem type of spirituality)<sup>6</sup> or seeks a varied diet of liturgical and paraliturgical celebrations, which may include what is currently being called group or shared prayer.<sup>7</sup> What today's religious needs most of all is to understand and to practise apostolic prayer.

It is odd that the theory of the 'mixed' life – the alternation of apostolic action and contemplation, which began to develop in the years preceding the reformation, and came to full flower in the founding of the wholly apostolic orders in reformation and post-reformation times, should have dropped from view almost entirely. It has taken an ecumenical council to restore it to its rightful place in the christian life, particularly for those who have accepted consecration to an apostolic life by means of the evangelical councils. It is this blend, this integration of mission and contemplative prayer which is apostolic life and spirituality; and the prayer proper to it may rightly be called apostolic prayer.

In one sense, of course, all christian prayer is apostolic. It is the response to the divine communication, the acceptance and expression of the relationship initiated by God with his creature. In christian terms, prayer is always the reflection of the Father-Son relationship as revealed in Christ Jesus, the One sent to glorify the Father actively and passively at once. The glory of God is man consciously glorifying him in living the redemptive and unitive life: *gloria Dei*

<sup>6</sup> From the poem of James Leigh Hunt (1784–1859).

<sup>7</sup> The problem of maintaining a high level of spiritual awareness in regular liturgy is too familiar to need rehearsing here. More frequent community gatherings would seem to demand the same sort of contemplative leisure required for the public recitation of the hours of the traditional office. Those with extensive experience of shared prayer know that this form of prayer depends intrinsically on the individual faith relationship. This is particularly true of a balanced pentecostalism: cf O'Connor, Edward D., C.S.C.: *The Pentecostal Movement in the Catholic Church* (Ave Maria Press, 1971), especially ch 7.

*vivens homo*, to use the phrase of Irenaeus. And this is apostleship. Christian tradition reveals a consistent pattern of this father-son relationship and communication; it is foreshadowed in the choice and response of the old testament prophets,<sup>8</sup> manifested in the new testament in Christ's choice of his apostles and their response,<sup>9</sup> and characterized for ever in the choice-response of Paul.<sup>10</sup> Ideally, then, it is in the nature of this communication, of this response, to develop, to become more and more articulate after the pattern of Christ's own articulation of it, until a crisis point of irrevocable choice is reached: 'my meat and drink is to do the will of him who sent me, to accomplish his work'.<sup>11</sup> So, for every christian, graced and chosen by baptism, there is an ideal uninterrupted flow of gift-response, out of the first communication and gift, which suits growth in 'wisdom, age and favour', and is appropriate to the unique combination of qualities which make up the individual christian person. Ultimately, for some, there will be a proffer of consecration, the response to which is in order of approximation to Christ's own mission and takes on the same evangelical shape as his – the mission to heal and to teach. This consecration and response is specifically apostolic: its development will be in the order of integrating ever more fully the evangelical operation and the contemplative assimilation.

Here we find that the traditional and classic texts on contemplation turn out to be a constituent part of the evangelical description of the apostolate. Such a description is that of Paul to the corinthians, where he speaks of participation in Christ's mission as the contemplation of his glory:

We all reflect as in a mirror the splendour of the Lord; thus we are transfigured into his likeness, from splendour to splendour, such is the influence of the Lord who is Spirit. Seeing then that we have been entrusted with this commission, which we owe entirely to God's mercy, we never lose heart . . . The same God who said 'let light shine out of darkness' has caused his light to shine within us, to give us a light of revelation, the revelation of the glory of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup>

This principle of integration of mission and contemplation was firmly stated in the conciliar decree on the religious life, appropriately called 'the search for perfect charity', and applied to all religious, irrespective of the specific mode of their search:

<sup>8</sup> Cf Isai 6, 6ff; Jer 1, 4ff; Ezek 2, 1-3, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Cf Acts 9.

<sup>11</sup> Jn 4, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Cf Mt 4, 18-22; 9, 9.

<sup>12</sup> 2 Cor 3, 16-4, 12.

Members of *every* religious Institute will seek God above all things and him alone; and in them, contemplation, by means of which they cling to him in mind and heart, will be wedded to the apostolic love which empowers them to share his redemptive work and spread God's kingdom.<sup>13</sup>

But it would appear to have a more immediate and urgent application to those 'many Institutes devoted to different kinds of apostolic work', in which 'apostolic and charitable activity is of the essence of religious life', and the vocation of whose members is 'primarily to follow Christ and to serve Christ himself in the members of his body'. For these religious, 'apostolic action must derive from their own intimate union with him'.<sup>14</sup>

The inexorable demands which this kind of life would make have long been recognized in the Church. In fact, one might say without fear of contradiction that the feasibility of the ideal has been totally accepted only in the last few years. Over and again, tradition asserts that for the religious the external apostolate is highly perilous, and so often is a snare and a delusion. It may be that here we have a hitherto unacknowledged reason for the large numbers of recent defections from the apostolic religious life: the recognition, at last, of the immense difficulty experienced in living it to the full.<sup>15</sup> However, since the time of St Thomas Aquinas, there have been strong voices in the tradition insisting not only on the feasibility of the mixed life and its development, but of its absolute necessity 'to meet the needs of the times'. St Thomas never burked the difficulties; he merely insisted on the essential role of contemplative prayer in the life of the preacher.<sup>16</sup> Others after him emphasized that the life of loving service could make a man a contemplative. Such a one is the fourteenth century englishman, Walter Hilton:

If you would be a spouse of Jesus Christ and would find him whom your soul loves, I shall tell you where Jesus your spouse is, and where

<sup>13</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> The traditional teaching on the religious life has always leaned heavily on Mt 19 and the stress laid by our Lord himself on the difficulty of the life of the counsels. Nor can there be any doubt, in the experience of religious who have lived through the recent period of renewal, that monastic structures, though incompatible with a full and authentic apostolic life, did afford a very definite protection against 'worldliness'. Some medieval writers did maintain that it is possible to live as Paul lived, 'with one's head in the clouds and one's feet on the earth'; but this demanded a dedication which assumed that the smallest dependence on the material was transferred to God.

<sup>16</sup> St Thomas *loc. cit.*; cf also q. 180, a. 2.

you can find him – in your sick brother who is lame or blind or afflicted with any other disease. Go to the hospital and find Christ there; see how he is in pain and suffering and worn with disease; help him, ease him and have compassion on him. . . . I am not here reproving the great yearnings and the love-longings that some men have for God, who give themselves wholly to wait upon him in contemplation and nothing else, for that is good. What I wish to do here is to explain how the active life and the contemplation of Jesus Christ can come together in a man. The best and the surest way is the one I have mentioned: that a man should gather himself into himself away from his desire for all exterior things, enter into his own thought, then hand himself so entirely over to God that he sees nor feels nor looks at nothing but God alone as though there was nothing else but God and himself, as though he could feel and understand nothing except Jesus Christ. And in this way whatever he does for anyone in general or particular he feels and understands that he does it for God.<sup>17</sup>

It is this integration of action and contemplation that Fr Jerome Nadal, one of the first companions of Ignatius Loyola, explains as the charism proper to the religious order founded by Ignatius. According to Nadal, apostolic prayer consists in living spiritually according to a special grace. This prayer, he says, is filled with the love of God and directed towards the greater glory of God. Such prayer in fact proceeds from God, who is himself the fulness of charity. And, as the Son is inserted into our human history by his incarnation and has lifted up our human condition to a deified level by his passion and his death, so in him our prayer finds its root.<sup>18</sup> Of its very nature it brings us to express the fulness of God's charity in seeking his greater glory, the most complete possible service. This is the prayer that will enlighten our intelligence and inflame our hearts. It is as necessary for perceiving the call of Christ clearly as it is for its faithful execution.

But there can be no doubt that this apostolic prayer is feasible only for those who are in earnest in their search for perfect charity. Its nature is perhaps best explained by blessed Peter Faber, another companion of Ignatius Loyola:

I was reflecting on the way of praying well and of certain ways of performing good works: how the good desires of prayer prepare the

<sup>17</sup> *The Goad of Love*, ed. Kirchberger (London, 1952), pp 126–8.

<sup>18</sup> *Monumenta Historica Societatis Jesu* (MHSI), Nadal IV, pp 673, 676.

<sup>19</sup> Cf Nicolau, M., S.J.: *Jerónimo Nadal, Obras y Doctrinas espirituales* (Madrid, 1949), pp 476 ff.

way of good works, and also, how, in reverse, good works make for good desires. I also remarked, and understood clearly, that the man who seeks God in spirit in good works will find him later on in his prayer much better than he would have, had he not sought him in work. I remarked that it often happens that we seek God particularly in prayer, only to find him later on in our work. So he who seeks and finds the spirit of Christ in good works makes progress in a more solid way than he who is occupied with prayer alone. One could say that to possess Christ in the practice of good works and to possess him in prayer can be compared to possessing him in fact and possessing him in affection.

You must therefore strive to break yourself, to mortify yourself, to concentrate your energies, to adapt them to finding all possible good in your actions. In this way you will often experience that here is the best preparation for mental prayer. This kind of life is proper both to Martha and to Mary, for it is built on prayer and action, and is the union of the active and contemplative lives; in such a way that if you have exercised yourself in the one or the other, not for itself (as so often happens) but for the sake of the other, you come to realize that the practice of prayer is the means to better action, and that is the means itself to prayer; though, speaking in general, it will be better to direct all your prayer towards the goal of increasing your good works.<sup>20</sup>

One might fairly say that the Church in her recent documents has taken up where the spiritual writers of the seventeenth century left off. We have already seen what sort of prayer is adumbrated for religious in the decree on the renewal and adaptation of religious life.<sup>21</sup> But the point is made much more forcibly in the recent instruction on religious formation:

They (sc. religious in formation) need to be taught step by step how they may achieve the integration in their own lives of contemplation and action: a unity which is one of the essential and primary values of these Institutes. Its acquisition demands a proper understanding of the specific nature of the spiritual life, and of the ways by which a closer union with the Lord may be achieved. For it is the same love for God and for men which animates a person, whether this is shown in solitary intimate communion with God, or in the generous zeal of total dedication to apostolic labour. At the same time, the young religious should be warned that this unity so ardently desired, the

<sup>20</sup> *Memoriale*, in *MHSI, Mon. Fabri*, pp 554-8.

<sup>21</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis* 5 and 6.

goal of all living creatures as they strive after perfect self-expression, is not achieved simply by activity; nor is it ordinarily perceived on a purely psychological level, since it is deeply rooted in God's own love, which is the bond of perfection transcending all human understanding.<sup>22</sup>

We must ask first of all what meaning is to be given to contemplation in this context. Most religious will agree that it is a word that has not been in current use for long. In fact, it will be within the experience of most that, in spite of the monastic structures within which they lived for so long, in the days of their formation they were given to understand that contemplation was not for them; they were *active* religious. The form of prayer proper to the active religious was 'meditation'. This was normally explained as a preliminary exercise of imagination, on a passage of holy scripture, usually the gospel, in which the person was encouraged to 'see the place and the persons and hear them speaking and acting'; he then went on to reflect on the persons, words and actions, and finally, either 'to apply all this to himself', or 'to make acts' of love, determination or whatever seemed most appropriate.

The extraordinary thing about this 'method' of mental prayer or meditation is that it is a truncated and distorted form of contemplation as this has been traditionally understood in the Church. There is a reasonable consensus in traditional catholic theology that, until the seventeenth century, mystical prayer, contemplation and contemplative prayer are synonymous terms.<sup>23</sup> But in many apostolic congregations, and in particular in the society of Jesus, the official prayer has for so long been not contemplation, but meditation, in the sense in which it has been described above. There are long-standing and good reasons for the reluctance and reserve on the part of the theologians of the apostolic religious life to accept contemplative prayer as proper to this life. There was a fear of illuminism and quietism which became obsessive; and, nearer to our own day, at the turn of the century, a new-found predilection towards mystical prayer had its accidental connections with the modernist crisis in the person of George Tyrell.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> *Renovationis Causam*, 5, in *Supplement to The Way*, 7 (June, 1969), pp 25ff.

<sup>23</sup> Cf e.g. Knowles, David: *What is Mysticism?* (London, 1967).

<sup>24</sup> In the english province of the Society of Jesus, the scholastics were warned against reading the 14th century english spiritual writers (Tyrell had written an introduction at the turn of the century to an edition of *The Revelations of Divine Love* of Julian of Norwich), on the ground that the prayer of the Society was 'meditation' and had nothing to do with contemplation. Cf Meadows, Denis: *Obedient Men* (London, 1955), pp 192-2.



On the other hand, as has already been noticed, it has frequently been necessary in apostolic congregations to regulate the contemplative eagerness of many of their members, because this attraction to contemplation has constantly threatened apostolic availability. And it still remains true that by and large progress in contemplative prayer demands the enclosed or withdrawn situation. It does seem to flourish best in the monastic situation, in which the pre-occupation is the *opus Dei*. It is for these reasons that both in theory and in practice a strong tendency developed to insist on the incompatibility between the apostolic vocation and the call to contemplation. In recent years, however, spiritual theologians have argued cogently that, though the apostolic religious, normally speaking, is not called to the heights of contemplation along the way mapped out by mystics such as John of the Cross, the prayer of such religious is in a very true sense contemplative.

In the classical terminology of western spirituality, contemplation properly so called is the final phase of a process known in general as *lectio divina*, which consists of four stages, reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation:

Reading is the careful study of the scriptures, concentrating all one's powers on it. Meditation is the busy application of the mind to seek with the help of one's own reason for knowledge of hidden truth. Prayer is the heart's devoted turning to God to do away with evil and to obtain what is good. Contemplation is when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness.<sup>25</sup>

The purpose of this process is the union of the whole man, with all his faculties of mind and heart, with the person of Christ; because it is only in Christ that God is perceived and loved. Since the apostolic vocation is conceived as the unitive participation in Christ's saving mission,<sup>26</sup> and since there can be neither participation nor assimilation in faith without contemplation, it follows that the apostle will be primarily and all the time a contemplative, dedicated to unitive prayer. The only difference between him and the

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<sup>25</sup> This description of the contemplative process is taken from a twelfth century treatise, the *Scala Claustralium*, attributed at various times to Augustine, Bernard and Bonaventure. The Latin text (edited by E. Colledge and the present writer) is available in the Series *Sources Chrétiennes*, under the title *Guigues II: Lettre sur la vie contemplative* (Paris, 1970), pp 82-3. An english version was printed in *The Way*, Vol 5 (October 1965), pp 333ff.

<sup>26</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 8.

*ex professo* contemplative is that, whereas the latter's prayer has as its end advancement to the highest point possible in this life of the sight of God and union with him, the prayer of the apostle is strictly subordinated to the apostolic end of his Institute. Here contemplative graces are given to dispose the man for that choice, that way of life, that action by which he will best serve his creator and Lord. The apostle, like the contemplative, must make the *lectio divina* his staple intellectual and affective diet. What Jerome Nadal wrote of the spirit of the first apostolic order applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to every Institute of the apostolic life:

The spirit of the society is a clarity of vision or clear-sightedness in Christ which takes possession of a man and directs him by an habitual orientation of the soul, in the union of perfect charity and in obedience to the Church and the sovereign pontiff.<sup>27</sup>

Ideally, the union which the apostolic vocation demands is the union of all my powers and faculties with those of Christ: a realization that I am to understand with his mind, to choose with his will, to remember with his memory: so that my whole self, all that I am and all that I do, is in Christ rather than in myself. We are back where we began: at Paul's understanding of what it means to be an apostle. This is nothing other than the total realization of the christian vocation, which is possible only when we know the length and the breadth and the height and the depth of that love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

'No one attains to this unity (of contemplation and action) without consistent denial of self over a long period, or without continually striving to purify his intention in the midst of action'.<sup>29</sup> Such is the story of Paul's apostolic life:

Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

<sup>27</sup> MHSL, *Nadal IV*, pp 690ff.

<sup>29</sup> *Renovationis Causam*, *ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> Eph 3, 18-19.

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.<sup>30</sup>

So it is that a man acts no longer of himself, but Christ acts in and through him for the salvation of men. *Vivo ego, iam non ego . . .*<sup>31</sup>

There can be no question that the needs and dimensions of apostolic prayer, properly understood, will have a crucial part to play in the establishment of new structures to take the place of those which so many religious Institutes have rightly discarded as militating against their apostolic purposes. Equally, honesty compels us to admit that growth in apostolic prayer demands structures; and the renewal of our life-style will be dictated not so much by the work itself but by the apostolic spirit with which the service must be imbued.

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<sup>30</sup> Phil 3, 7-14.

<sup>31</sup> Gal 2, 20.