

THE DIMENSIONS OF GROUP PRAYER

By MICHAEL IVENS

THE TERMS 'shared prayer' or 'group prayer' are fairly new arrivals in the catholic vocabulary, and it may be well to begin by indicating the sense in which they are generally used. To an earlier generation, the terms would probably have suggested coming together to recite the divine office or the rosary. More recently, they might have conjured up visions of informal discussion conducted in a more or less prayerful atmosphere: retreat discussion, for example. It is best, however, to confine the terms, in keeping with a growing tendency, to a middle area between the two.¹ The obvious difference from the older, more set forms of worship, lies in the element of spontaneous give and take. You go to divine office knowing exactly what is going to happen; not so with a prayer group. But spontaneity cannot be produced to order. It betokens mutual acceptance, trust and involvement: qualities implicit, no doubt, in any meaningful experience of group worship, but considerably heightened as a rule in shared prayer. On the other hand, shared prayer is not group discussion. The nub of it is not 'thinking things out' or 'coming up with ideas', but whatever reality of personal prayer it is given to each member of the group, at his particular stage of growth, to attain. The aim, ultimately, can be expressed only in rather paradoxical terms – at which some might balk – by saying that, through the talking and sharing of a prayer group one seeks what is beyond talking and sharing: that meeting between God and his creature which demands, on the creature's side, conscious attention and inner silence, and which, as such, is incommunicable. Where this aim is not at least implicitly accepted, as in a group where the emphasis lies on debate, or where silence is seen as embarrassing or out of place, the term 'shared prayer' would be inappropriate.

¹ It is beyond the scope of this article to consider the relationship between shared prayer and the liturgy, or to ask how far shared prayer might or should affect the development of the liturgy. Shared prayer, of course, is often introduced into liturgical celebration, either as a lead-in to it, as a substitute for the homily, or after communion.

Of course, the fluid patterns of current group worship are not amenable to hard and fast demarcation, and certain borderline cases are hard to classify. Group meditations where only a leader speaks, group homilies, certain styles of group reflection on scripture, closely approximate to shared prayer, and certainly provide an easy lead-in to it; but it would take us too far to consider them here. The characteristics mentioned above will suffice as a rough indication of the sort of group worship this article is about.

Why group prayer?

Any attempt to construct a *rationale* for shared prayer needs to start from the fundamental reason why a number of people go in for it. People do not normally pray together because abstract considerations commend the practice as a christian duty, or even because they believe that certain New Testament passages point to a lacuna in catholic worship, which needs to be remedied, whether we like it or not. People who pray together do so normally because they find in it the answer to a personal need. Why?

One reason why has to do with the situation of the modern believer. While generalizations about the modern believer are necessarily vulnerable, it would be safe to suggest that a particular and fairly wide-spread difficulty about belief today is that christians no longer enjoy the supportive climate of a believing community. Many people are uncomfortably conscious that, where the ultimate meaning of existence is concerned, they inhabit a mental universe completely alien to some of their closest friends. The Church holds little apparent relevance for their daily lives. Even the demise of the old devotional life, outmoded though much of it had become, leaves many people in something of an emotional vacuum. All this places strains on christian perseverance, and debilitates its affective quality. Of course, it would be absurd to see in shared prayer the complete solution to the problem. And in any case, shared prayer, like any other form of worship, can always turn in on itself. One can resort to it for the cosy security of a christian bolt-hole, or for mere emotional warmth without any real desire for a deepening of faith. In this case, the overall benefits, whether in terms of prayer or commitment, are likely to be slender. But if we need to be alive to certain risks, these should not obscure the inherently invigorating quality that people have actually discovered in prayer groups. In a prayer group, one is deeply involved in the process by which christians 'build one another up', which is what the trivialized word

'edification' really means. When people pray aloud, freely and spontaneously, faith is made visibly and effectively present. The quietening and uplifting atmosphere, its power to dispel agitating distractions, creates an environment for prayer of a sort which the febrile pace of many lives all too rarely provides. These are so many reasons why it is both possible and likely that many people have found in shared prayer a genuine remedy for the loneliness of the believer in an unbelieving world, and one whose effects really do 'take on' the texture of daily secular existence.

But shared prayer does not derive its value solely from the predicament of the modern believer. It is a distinctive realm of experience, valuable in its own right. This distinctiveness might best be put by saying that shared prayer provides simultaneously the experience of prayer (which is not necessarily the same thing as just 'saying prayers'), and of relationships with other people (which is not necessarily the same thing as sharing floor-space with other people), with the result that prayer and relationships interact on one another. In the setting of prayer, ordinary group experience, with both its joys and its burdens, becomes distinctively christian; its profound meaning, so easily eclipsed at other times, is brought into focus. The sense of human togetherness, normally very strong in a prayer group, becomes the awareness of being bound together by the charity of Christ. Even the sense of tension is placed in another perspective; from being merely irksome and irrelevant, it summons us to a deeper and more committed prayer, where Christ is met on his terms, not ours.

And if ordinary group experience is illuminated by prayer, it also leads into prayer. True, we cannot give other people our prayer as we can sometimes give them our thoughts. The essential meeting of prayer is something other than thoughts or words. Nevertheless what we say and do will often furnish the occasion, under grace, for God to touch another person. In countless ways we mediate God's word to one another. A fine illustration of this is provided in Yves Congar's book, *Lay People in the Church*. Talking about the role of the faithful in 'the forming of the image of God and Jesus Christ in human consciousness', Congar writes:

We generally confine our consideration to the official communication of knowledge of God by the public teaching of priests and bishops: we are insufficiently conscious of the 'lateral contributions', of how much we can do to show God to one another. How often have I learnt more about prayer from seeing so-and-so on his knees (some-

times a very lowly person), or from listening to someone else quite unconsciously testifying to what prayer means in his life. Seeing somebody else's freedom with his time, his goods, his heart, his friendship, I have learnt what the spirit of generosity and giving means, learnt, too, that I am selfish and mean. And there are the books that have been recommended to me, the questions put to me, the numberless occasions on which, through my brethren, through the noise and glare of the world, through anything, God has been made known to me, has stolen into my heart, to grow there – Jesus Christ was built up in me, and I in him . . . The Venerable Mary of the Incarnation tells how, when she was left a widow at nineteen, she was hesitating whether she should go on living 'in the world' when a friend (knowing little of her difficulty) said, 'One has to be all God's'. This was a flash of light that helped her decision. How many times have we not been similarly shown a way by a word from a fellow-christian.²

If this kind of communication is characteristic of christian community at all times, we must surely see a privileged case of it in shared prayer.

Forms of shared prayer

Prayer-meetings generally take place in private homes or in the community rooms of religious houses; and their keynote is informality. As a rule, there is a leader, who pronounces an opening prayer, brings the meeting to a close and, when necessary, tactfully heads off incipient argument; otherwise rôle-distinction is conspicuously absent. A successful prayer-group is deeply conscious of itself as a group of friends; after the prayer people usually stay together for a time. Indeed, the general conversation which follows prayer has its own value. It serves further to knit the group together in the unity of spirit engendered in prayer: it may offer a convenient opportunity for discussion, even for counselling. But this is not to say that the prevailing climate is one of godly solemnity. On the contrary, a frequently light-hearted tone is characteristic of a settled group where people are at ease with one another. A prayer group where laughter was out of order would have a long way to go.

But beyond these generalizations, it is not easy to describe what happens in prayer-groups. No two are exactly the same, and there is normally an ebb and flow in the style of any one group. However, with the proviso that any schematization in the matter is necessarily

² Congar, Y., O.P.: *Lay People in the Church* (London, 1965), pp 337–8.

rough and ready, it may be helpful to distinguish three broad styles of group prayer, each with its own strengths and limitations, which experience shows to have helped people to find genuine prayer in the context of genuine sharing.

The first type of group is characterized by a simple structure and by an emphasis on talking *about* prayer rather than on 'praying aloud'. A typical structure would be this:

Introductory prayer by the leader

Scripture reading

Silent prayer

Reflection

Silent prayer

Concluding reflections

'Reflection' is understood here as bearing on the whole experience of prayer. As well as relating thoughts or 'lights' gained in prayer, members of the group will tell one another whether their prayer was distracted or tranquil, whether or not it was aided by the scripture text. They will say how their prayer was affected (helped or impeded) by some distraction which the entire group will have shared, e.g. someone talking outside the room. It begins with the leader asking a general question like: 'How did it go?', 'How did you find God?'. Normally, and very desirably, those who do not wish to speak are under no constraint to do so.

This provides an excellent introduction to shared prayer. It accustoms people to talking about personal spiritual experience. The distinction, if a little contrived, between silence and speaking, and the emphasis on talking about one's prayer as a whole, are safeguards against two related hazards of group prayer: a tendency for inner silence to be overwhelmed by too much talk, and a tendency to lapse into discussion. It is also a school of prayer, in which people learn from hearing others talking about their own prayer. On the other hand, as time goes on, people may start to chafe under the constraints of this type of group. As the initial bashfulness recedes, they may want to break into words – of praise, love, petition or whatever – regardless of the structures. When this happens the group enters category two.

In the second type of group prayer an agenda is not essential; though at least to begin with, a simple structure can be useful. A typical one might be as follows:

Introductory prayer

Scripture reading

Silence

Shared prayer

Concluding hymn or prayer.³

Here we find a new feature, spontaneous praying aloud. It is obviously impossible to offer an adequate description of this, but one can touch on one or two characteristics. First, spontaneous prayer includes in varying degrees spontaneous silence. This is interspersed by utterance of various sorts. It is not considered a sin against spontaneity to employ set forms of prayer, the 'Our Father' being particularly popular. There is much ejaculatory prayer, often with a strong emphasis on praise and thanksgiving, and much prayer of intercession. It is common for people to talk briefly about things that particularly concern them – the plight of a friend, a personal anxiety, a moment of insight or joy in the daily round. There is a place for brief reflections, even if these are not couched in the form of prayer. And most groups find it helpful to sing.

The advantage of this style of group prayer is that, while not suited to everyone, its low emotional key makes it suitable to a fairly wide range of temperament and sensibility. It has proved quietly invigorating for people with long established habits of prayer, who have found in it a remedy for dryness and aid towards harmonizing prayer and the rest of life. It has been successfully developed in many religious communities. (It should be added in fairness that a group may well need time and patience to develop sufficient ease and mutual trust to speak from the heart.)

To attempt to drive a frontier between this and a third type of group would falsify the picture from the outset. Both are characterized by freedom and spontaneity. It is a mark of both that structure and procedure, though these may exist, are accorded minor importance. Even so, there is a recognizable, though not easily definable, difference. On the surface, it appears as a difference in degrees of restraint, or, to borrow Marshall McLuhan's distinction, between a 'hot medium' and a 'cold medium'. Further enquiry will normally show that the difference has something to do with the extent to which a group has come under the influence of what is called – not quite satisfactorily – the Catholic Pentecostal Movement, or the Charismatic Renewal Movement.⁴

³ As a group settles, a set time for silence is often found artificial, and sometimes the opening scripture reading is dispensed with.

⁴ Part of the difficulty in discussing Catholic Pentecostalism is the lack of an agreed terminology. The word 'movement', though indispensable, hardly does justice to the

The latter is a complex, fascinating, and probably momentous development in the post-conciliar Church, and it is hardly possible to do it justice in a brief survey. The first point to notice is that it is not just a style of group prayer, but a 'spirituality', in the sense in which Pius XII defined that term, as a way of picturing God, talking about God and dealing with God. It is a spirituality firmly rooted in the basis and essentials of christian life: faith as personal surrender; the life-giving mission of the Spirit, poured into the hearts of the faithful; the need for grace to be visibly at work in the life of the community. If it has restored to catholic consciousness forgotten or depreciated elements of spiritual tradition, this is partly through the rehabilitation of the full range of charisms (tongues, healing, prophecy etc.), partly – and probably more significantly – through its insistence on the ministry of the faithful to one another, especially by intercessory prayer and the sharing of spiritual experience.

It is not easy to determine whether a particular group should be called 'pentecostal' or 'charismatic'. Where people pray in tongues or lay hands on one another as a gesture accompanying intercessory prayer, the pentecostal inspiration is clear. But it is manifest too, though less definably, in a certain tone. This is not to say that the dramatic or startling is of frequent occurrence. Reports of what goes on at prayer meetings naturally batten on the seemingly exotic or bizarre elements; but in fact the atmosphere of pentecostal prayer groups is usually deeply tranquil. Nevertheless visitors, even if they already belong to other prayer groups, are usually impressed by the astonishing degree of freedom and mutual acceptance, and the resulting possibility of expressing a range and depth of feeling normally kept firmly beneath the hatches in catholic gatherings.

heterogeneous character of the groups, still less to their distaste for organization and definition and their openness to all comers. 'Pentecostal', while denoting the thrust of their spirituality, a certain way of looking to the apostolic Church as a model and inspiration, and a consciousness of John XXIII's prayer for a 'new Pentecost', is liable to over-emphasize the important, but not primordial, influence of Interdenominational Pentecostalism. Unless watched, 'charismatic' can develop elitist overtones alien to the true spirit of the movement. There exists a large and growing literature on the subject. Particularly valuable are: Ranaghan, Kevin and Dorothy: *Catholic Pentecostals* (New York, 1969); O'Connor, Edward D., C.S.C.: *The Pentecostal Movement in the Catholic Church* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1971); Tugwell, Simon, O.P.: *Did You Receive the Spirit?* (London, 1972); Hollenweger, Walter, J.: *The Pentecostals* (London, 1972); Balkam, Robert, M.: 'The Pentecostal Movement in the United States', in *Clergy Review*, vol 55, no 3 (March, 1972).

Of course, like anything powerful, all this carries attendant hazards. It is fatally easy to bandy about a phrase like 'letting go', without being quite clear what one is letting go of. Emotional release can become an end in itself. Excessive preoccupation with the extraordinary can always creep in. Such snares are all too easy to emphasize; many pentecostal groups are aware of them, and well able to defend themselves against the crasser charges of illuminism or imprudence. Ultimately, however, their worth is going to be proved not by the parrying of objections but by the effects wrought upon the life of the Church. And in a brief history of little more than five years, these have proved remarkable. Pentecostalism has borne fruit in a vigorous sense of human community. It has enabled people to find deep peace in a disturbed world and an untidy Church. It has restored to many the true sense of their married, priestly or religious vocation. Significantly, it tends to alienate extremists. As *Time Magazine* put it: 'The Pentecostals have an unhappy faculty of offending both liberals and conservatives in Catholicism: liberals resent their insistent orthodoxy, conservatives their communal life-style'.⁵ This 'unhappy faculty' is a further reason for believing that we have to do with a deeply genuine force of spiritual renewal.

There exists, then, a marked diversity among prayer groups; and this, coupled with the flexibility of prayer groups themselves, is beginning already to bring about the tensions and uncertainties inherent in any pluralist situation. People notice that other groups are different from their own, and ask whether their own is the type best suited to themselves. And groups themselves, as they become conscious that others are more liberated, 'charismatic' or just more exciting than themselves – or alternatively quieter and more attached to silence – tend to ask where their own fulfilment lies, whether they have not got stuck at the merely superficial, and how they can best help one another to grow simultaneously in praying and sharing.

What's in it for me?

There are good grounds for thinking that, in one form or another, catholics in increasing numbers will find it valuable to pray together. Prayer groups already embrace a wide human range and display a remarkable capacity to transcend crude distinctions be-

⁵ *Time Magazine*, June 21, 1972.

tween young and old, intellectual and unsophisticated, conservative and progressive. The experience of shared prayer itself has enabled seemingly unlikely people to find the qualities of ease and openness that shared prayer demands. And sociologically speaking, prayer groups fit into a general pattern characteristic of contemporary culture both religious and secular (think of group dynamics, group retreats or group-living experiments in religious Institutes).

But it is one thing to say that the minority practice of group prayer is likely to grow and another to propose it as a general norm. Many people find the whole idea distasteful, embarrassing, or just meaningless; nor should they be considered as lacking either in spiritual depth or in community sense. The central act of shared worship of the christian community is the liturgy; and shared prayer, insofar as it is something distinct from the liturgy, is best thought of as an important, but probably not a dominant, feature of a pluralist community. In any case, there is something tragi-comic about using shared prayer as a stick with which to beat people into uniformity.

Even so, the decision to persevere in one's group, leave it or change it for another, is not generally a trivial one, on all fours with the decision to give up or remain hopefully faithful to a flagging television serial. It will always be well to look beyond immediate effects, such as enjoyment or the lack of it, to the deeper ones. Does group prayer help to keep green in your life the value of prayer? Without it, would you be likely to pray less? Do its effects extend to your daily commerce with immediate reality, helping you to find the christian sense of work, relationships and the ordinary perplexities of life? Does the group, in a way you may find hard to explain, lay bare the defences behind which you hide from yourself? By these standards you may find that a rather dull group is nevertheless working deeply on your life, or that a more lively group, which prevents you from withdrawing too much into yourself, brings you nourishment, support and inspiration.

On the other hand, it is possible in all honesty to reach a very different conclusion. For the interpenetration of prayer and community demands a large measure of peace and inner harmony. If it is a normal and valuable element of shared prayer to find that praying with others is not always easy, this aspect must never dominate the experience. There is little point in going on, and normally every reason to stop, if your experience in a particular group is heavily weighted on the side of boredom, conflict or emotional disturbance.

The prayer group: conditions for development

To turn now to the development of the group as a whole. The fundamental impetus of a group derives, of course, not from the self-conscious application of principles, however noble these may be, but from the openness of its members to the Spirit and to one another. A prayer-group can no more be run by the book than a family or a group of friends can. It is essentially free and unpredictable, learning as it goes along, often having no need to put the lessons of experience into words. And it would be quite absurd to suggest that a group should get together to decide how 'spontaneous' they should allow themselves to become. Guidelines, then, will be useful only insofar as they help along the process by which a group grows in the true freedom of the Spirit. But with this in mind, it may be worth considering in a little more detail two simple and correlative conditions of shared prayer: the genuine seeking after prayer, and the genuine acceptance of the multiple and complex human factors that go to make up a group. It is primarily in the growth and convergence of these qualities that the movement of a group towards its own realization consists.

A possible threat to the authentic development of prayer in a group may well lie concealed in a common tendency to extol shared prayer as a telling blow in the campaign for communitarian, as against 'private' or 'individual', approaches to worship. The profound sense in which all prayer is ultimately communitarian (made possible by the Church, offered with the Church, and giving to the Church) should not obscure the fact that the essence of prayer, if not exactly 'private', is at any rate personal. The danger in a prayer group is that, at least on the level of unreflective attitudes, prayer comes to be identified with the thoughts and feelings that we can communicate to one another by words, gestures, tones of voice, songs and so on. As we have seen, to disparage this sharing would eviscerate a prayer group; it is mainly in this way that the members of the group mediate Christ to one another. But there is no authentic prayer except where the word, however it comes to us, is received in inner silence at the depth of ourselves (traditionally known as the 'heart') where real prayer takes place. And this inner silence in its turn supposes an element of bodily silence. There should be moments in a meeting when those present help one another's prayer not by words but by the eloquent and strongly social act of saying nothing.

On the other hand, there can be no hard and fast rules about the

right blend of speech and silence in a given group. Each group needs to find its own pattern, which may take time to emerge. Some groups proceed from too much silence, of a rather tense and oppressive sort, to a phase of near-obsessive rhetoric, before they find their own mean. Others travel by the opposite way. In either case, of course, the eventual pattern may vary considerably from one meeting to another.

But if there is a danger of voiding group prayer of a really effective prayer dimension, it is possible to fall into the opposite snare of burking the full implications of praying in a *group*. At a prayer meeting the role of other people bears no resemblance to the finger pointing to the moon in the buddhist proverb, a signpost interesting not for itself but only for what it shows. A prayer group has its human consistency, its interplay of ties and frictions, its complex and sometimes obscure motivations. Hence a condition and a fruit of group prayer will be a growing acceptance of other people. For most of the time this will mean nothing more than accepting that others may pray more sentimentally – or more woodenly – than oneself, or display an all too transparent delight in making speeches. Or we may find ourselves far more deeply challenged: other's needs striking deep into our own preoccupations, even another's joy appearing as an affront to our own dryness.

Equally, it belongs to the inner asceticism of group prayer to be considerate towards others. True, we must be humble enough to reveal our needs, aspirations, longings; to say what is in our heart, to accept the risk of letting ourselves be instrumental in bringing God to others, as we know others have been in bringing him to us. But it is important always to be conscious of the limitations and sensibilities of others. One should be chary about forcing the emotional pace of a group. And considerateness on the part of the naturally loquacious is a necessary condition in a prayer group for some element of silence!

But the temptation to stand too lightly to the human element in a prayer group may occur in another, more subtle, guise. It is always possible, on the level of unreflective attitudes, to be too ready to see only the hand of God in every aspect of group experience and in everything said in the group. So it is good to recognize that the sense of peace and integration, the affective tone of the group, is likely to owe much to such factors as music, the sexual differences in the group, the congenial personalities of its members. All these things mediate God to us, but if we forget that God is beyond his

mediations, we might ultimately be the worse off; feeling that we have somehow lost God when the atmosphere of the group gives place to the tougher and colder climate of our everyday lives. (C. S. Lewis remarks somewhere that God provides us with many inns on our journey but we must never take them for home. There are aspects of group prayer which are best thought of in this way.) Here again the path lies between two extremes. On the one hand it is contrary to the meaning of group prayer to 'switch off' to others – even if one could do so. By being attentive to others we expose ourselves to being challenged, confronted, enlightened by what others say. Further, the more a group prays together, the more a harmony of mind and feeling tends to be established. Nevertheless, in what is said there will always be loose ends and irrelevancies, and we need to be free enough to take into our own prayer what helps, and to let pass what does not. One never dismisses another's prayer; but there are times when what someone is saying matters less than the fact that he is praying aloud and bearing witness to his faith.

Shared prayer in perspective

As we saw, group prayer is a form of worship which exists in its own right. It is neither a stepping-stone nor milk for babes. Here and there, it seems to be finding acceptance even in contemplative communities. It also has an important contribution to make to retreats, not only for its power to kindle into life a religious sense which the arctic climate of many people's lives leaves largely dormant, but for its intrinsic quality as a christian community experience.

On the other hand, it is the mark of genuine group prayer experience not only to confer a particular quality upon the rest of our relationships, but to extend its effects to the rest of prayer. Far from limiting our prayer, it extends the range of our prayer. It can bring us to the point of confrontation where solitude becomes, perhaps for the first time, a felt need. While it will not always make prayer easy, it may well help to make prayer a little more possible at the times when it goes against the grain to pray. The capacity for inner quiet and the deepening of religious awareness, which are common fruits of shared prayer, may sometimes make all the difference between mere boredom and the hard, savourless, distressed, yet earnestly attentive prayer of desolation: between the emptiness of a bus-stop in the rain, and the fierce emptiness of the desert where God speaks to the heart. Moreover, group prayer

tends to bring a heightened appreciation of the liturgy and divine office. Indeed such effects have often been noted amongst catholic pentecostals.

But if these are natural developments, it is easy to be facile. Natural points of development are notoriously liable to become points of fixation. Growth is always exigent, calling for the renunciation of an all too comfortable dependence, and for an openness to new demands. Group prayer carries no more built-in efficacy than any other 'aid' to christian life, and perhaps it is well to insist on this. But growing through and in group prayer does not mean growing out of it. There is every reason to believe that, for those who have found deep personal value in praying with others, this value will remain in their lives as a constant enrichment.