

TRINITARIAN PRAYER

By SISTER MARGARET WILLIAMS

*In the name of the bee
And of the butterfly
And of the breeze Amen*

THIS TRIAD, written by the lonely Emily Dickinson, is a song in the mood of a spring day: light, wistful, whimsical. But it is more: it is a sign of the cross in terms of fragility, stark in its loveliness. It can be unfolded in traditional religious symbols: the Father, builder-bee of the universe; the Son breaking from the entombing chrysalis; the Spirit blowing where he wills. The mystery of the Trinity was lurking one morning in the poet's garden.

That mystery has been lurking in creation from the beginning, when the Spirit of God moved over the void. It became explicit when the Son first said 'Father' in human language and breathed his love on his human friends. It has evolved through centuries of theological exploration. There are signs that now this most difficult because too simple of mysteries, one requiring revelation even to be guessed, may unfold for everyday christians in terms of everyday life. We need not be poets to meet it in our own gardens.

Some christians are afraid to confront the mystery; they avoid it for fear of error, for want of vocabulary, or simply from unfamiliarity. Yet christians are such in virtue of that very mystery. We were all baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the holy Spirit. When we die the sacrament of the sick will send us forth in the name of the Father who created us, of the Son who redeemed us, of the holy Spirit who sanctified us. Through all the years between – a life-time – the Church has seen to it that we pray in the name of the Trinity in every liturgical utterance, through Jesus Christ who with the Father lives and reigns in the unity of the holy Spirit. We are accustomed to petitions addressed to the divine Persons separately: to the Father for our daily needs, to the Son for pardon, to the holy Spirit for light on our problems. But in times of silence, of depth, of contact, of what we know as contemplation, how conscious are we of God as the Three-in-One? How are we to approach such prayer if untrained in theology and scripture? And if we are among the growing number of those so trained, how can we turn such mental complexity into the simplicity of real prayer?

There is a door into this realm open to all; the door is Christ. We are at home in christocentric prayer; the gospel is the starting point of meditation. Here we ponder the words and actions of Christ. We see him go off to the mountains where he spends the night in 'the prayer of God'. With the disciples we track him down at dawn and say: 'Teach us to pray'. He begins the Our Father, and we are led straight into the Trinity.

What is that 'prayer of God' in which Christ has spent the whole night?

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Safe in the familiar presence of the Son of Man, the christian can make the leap from time and space into the changeless, the transcendent, into that realm in which Beatrice said to Dante: 'We have reached the point at which everywhere is here and every when is now'.¹ John made the leap and found that 'In the beginning was the Word'.² The Word is the second Person of the Trinity, and as a Person is no other than he whom we have known in the flesh, the man Christ Jesus, His divine nature is unchanged by the human nature assumed at Nazareth not so long ago in history. In God's triune life the beginning is now, and the Word is just being uttered: 'Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee'.³ From one verse of a gospel and one of a psalm, prayer becomes trinitarian.

We cannot picture the scene as in gospel meditation, but the reality of it takes hold of us in the serenity that follows the surrender of faith. Thomas Aquinas called the Son 'the Word of the Father breathing Love'. The divine processions constitute the life of God within himself: the Unbegotten utters his self-knowledge in a single Word so fully that this Word is a Person equal to the Utterer, one in substance with him while distinct from him. And the Father and the Son breathe forth their love of each other so fully that this Love is a Person equal to the Breathers, one in substance with them, while distinct from them. The mutual self-giving of Being-Knowledge-Love is God's life. If, according to the time-honoured definition, prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God, man's being-knowledge-love passing into another, may not the very life of God be also called the prayer of God? When Christ passed his nights in prayer, his human mind and heart were sharing the transcendent life that was always his as the Word.

Where Christ is, christians are called to be, as adopted sharers of his sonship. Adoration, wonder, surrender to the absolute Being-Wisdom-Love, are human forms of what happens first in the Trinity itself. The 'Holy, Holy, Holy' of every mass is the echo on earth of what is going on in heaven. And here christians, who as men were made to be social, experience the truth that community exists within the divine nature. The one God is not a lonely God. There is uncreated community in circumincession, that movement towards each other of the eternal Three within which they are. One. The lonely human heart finds itself at home in a way of prayer which, through sheer longing for the ultimate, seeks triunity beyond – or more truly at the heart of – time and space.

Uncreated community led, by God's free choice, to created community. Creation is the outward expression of God's inner life; the divine processions are of his nature, the divine missions are its overflow. The Father is the prime creator. Of the Word who is his wisdom it is said: 'All things were made by him',⁴ while his Spirit 'reached from end to end mightily'.⁵ Light was made and the universe unfolded in the God-guided evolution that science explores

¹ *Paradiso*, XIX.

² Jn 1, 1.

³ Ps 2, 7.

⁴ Jn 1, 3.

⁵ Wis 8, 1.

in amazement. Finally: 'Let us make man to our own image and likeness'.⁶ Then there was a created community in communion with the uncreated.

Since the three persons worked together in the fashioning of a universe that reflects divine Being-Knowledge-Love, creation might be called the prayer of God in action. God himself is the first contemplative; for he looked upon his handiwork and 'saw that it was good'.⁷ His last-made creature can answer him. The first astronauts to orbit the moon looked back, from a point beyond all human experience, at their own planet and called it 'the good earth'. This is a form of trinitarian prayer easy to practise. Is there anyone who cannot pray when confronted by a bee, a butterfly or a breeze? Or a star or a human hand?

These things are always beautiful in themselves, but the human hand too easily becomes dirt-stained or blood-stained. Something went wrong with the one made to God's image; and then 'The Light shone in darkness'.⁸ But 'the darkness could not overcome it', and another mission from the heart of the Trinity took place: 'God so loved the world that he sent his only-begotten Son into the world, that the world might be saved by him'.⁹ Salvation required redemption, and redemption required incarnation. The scene is among the most familiar to art as to prayer: an angel salutes a young girl, and the three divine persons act through this annunciation. The will of the Father is done in Mary; through the overshadowing Spirit the Word is made flesh.

Soon the second Person was made visible in a child, and then in a man: Jesus who is the Christ. He was distinct from the Father whose will he fulfilled while driven by the Spirit, yet 'the Father and I are one',¹⁰ in 'the Love with which thou hast loved me'.¹¹ He was the Word of the Father breathing Love, on earth as it is in heaven. By taking human nature he drew the Trinity into the human scene. To the fishermen, farmers and merchants who watched him he could say: 'He who sees the me sees the Father'.¹² They watched the ways of a man who did his work and ate his bread as one anointed by the Spirit, showing the seven gifts and twelve fruits of the Spirit's presence. To follow Christ through the gospel story is to enter the unceasing trinitarian prayer of Christ himself. It does not matter whether the date be *Anno Domini* 30 or 1972: 'Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus'.¹³ For as the life of the Three-in-One is revealed by the Son of man, so is the life of the Son of man revealed by the sons of men. Christians are other Christs.

When Christ set his face to go to Jerusalem he 'offered himself immaculate to the Father through the Spirit'.¹⁴ When he and his fellowship made their first communion together he revealed most explicitly his oneness with the Father and the Paraclete. The priestly prayer was followed by the agony that puts prayer to the test: silence of the Father, absence of the Spirit, failure of the kingdom. In the forsakenness of the cross, human awareness of the

⁶ Gen 1, 26.

¹⁰ Jn 10, 30.

¹⁴ Heb 9, 14.

⁷ Gen 1, 2.

¹¹ Jn 17, 26.

⁸ Jn 1, 5.

¹² Jn 24, 9.

⁹ Jn 3, 16.

¹³ Phil 2, 5.

divine unity was lost. Yet into the Father's hands Christ breathed forth his spirit, in trinitarian oneness. As a sign, his dead heart was pierced and 'rivers of living water rose'. And 'this was said of the Spirit'.¹⁵

In the joy of restored life, from Easter to Pentecost, the Trinity took possession of the forming Church. Christ now called men 'my brothers', for 'I go to your Father and my Father'.¹⁶ And he sent his own breath upon them, saying: 'Receive the holy Spirit'.¹⁷ The record of how the young Church responded runs through the Acts of the Apostles, sometimes called 'the gospel of the holy Spirit', and through the letters of Paul, where the mystery is plumbed in terms of prayer experience.

Just as it had taken centuries for the mystery of the Trinity to become explicit, so centuries more were needed for the theology of the dogma to develop. Through this long time the mystery was kept before the faithful by the clear formulae of worship. It was vividly present in the prayer of the mystics: Dionysius, Augustine, the cistercians, the victorines, the fourteenth century solitaires, the spanish carmelites. This form of prayer seemed to be the monopoly of the cloister; but with the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola and more widespread training in prayer after the counter-reformation, the way was opened for the more conscious practice of trinitarian prayer by the whole people of God.

The signs that the time has come for a new and perhaps rapid growth in this practice are found in the outlook of the Church since Vatican Council II. Awareness of the solidarity of the people of God gives insight into the very meaning of the Church. Awareness of the social nature of holiness grows in proportion to a thirst for social justice. Communion in the Body of Christ calls for communication. The liturgy, already social in nature, develops mutual participation: priest with people, person with person. Between the liturgy and private prayer a third form is taking shape: communal prayer, the shared prayer of groups united for some common end.

Thus the aloneness of contemplation is widening to admit not only the other but the others in a mutual interdependence in which the unique relationship between the individual and God is given a new dimension. The need for community-building finds its pattern in the community of the divine Persons. In the Trinity the personal processions radiate in the creative missions. In the same way our inter-personal relationships radiate in social intercourse; we are called to live with each other as do the Three-in-One. The deepest and most private prayer leads to community-building:

The joy of enriching another and making him fruitful – that is the joy of the Father who begets and gives his Son; that is the joy of the Son who is the revelation of the Father, he whose prayer obtained for us the gift of the Spirit. That is the joy of being, like the holy Spirit, a love that is at first passive but afterwards praise of Father and

¹⁵ Jn 7, 39.

¹⁶ Jn 20, 17.

¹⁷ Jn 20, 23.

Son. To make a complete gift of self, in imitation of the blessed Trinity – that is the only way to create, as God creates in himself, a true community.¹⁸

This realization throws light on one of the most keenly felt psychological tensions of the present day, the tension between the demands of inviolable selfhood and of togetherness. The same thirst that drove the fathers of the desert into solitude and drove them to seek cloister in monastic life is calling men into Zen or Yoga or into revolt from the conventions of society. Yet these new seekers after solitude cannot and do not want to escape 'the world'; it calls to them no longer as a seduction but as an attraction to that solidarity with our fellowmen by which the world will ultimately be judged. Those who long, with Dag Hammerschold, for 'silence enveloping stillness', or with T. S. Eliot, for 'the still point of the turning world', are found among those most devoted to the service of others. The knowledge that the inviolable Oneness of God is necessarily a community of Persons calls for a prayer-life in which aloneness-with-the-Alone is not isolation, in which withdrawal is not segregation, in which self-fulfilment and self-giving are not two different things.

Such prayer takes the silent form needed by those who, by nature and by vocation, know that they must be contemplatives. It takes the dynamic form needed by those who know that they must spend and be spent in doing. It achieves a fusion of what we are too apt to look upon as a dichotomy between contemplation and action. In its silence, the divine rhythms are caught. It calls for faith beyond sight, hope beyond search, love beyond feeling. It is stripped, it is absolute. It demands complete sacrifice, even of the delights of solitude. In its dynamism it is alive, actualized in its basic attitude of gift, of the outpouring of one person into another. It is the prayer of men who live among men, who recognize the demands of society as the demands of the kingdom of God.

Trinitarian prayer is then the archetype of the ceaseless work by which that kingdom is built on earth. It must go on under all circumstances: in times of quiet, in times of labour, in the endless traffic of daily living. And as Christ is the door by which we enter the Trinity, so our prayer becomes trinitarian when it enters the human heart – the sacred Heart – of Christ. His heart in prayer is the still point of our evolving world.

Practical problems must be worked out; trinitarian prayer is both too simple and too deep to be sustained easily in our age of pressures and multiplicity. It is necessary to find the right rhythms of silence and speech, of relaxation and work, of solitude and sociability. This is equally true in convents, in homes, in occupations: prayer is for all. Current spirituality is unfolding many new methods and approaches to prayer. In all circumstances, a charism known to the saints of old and now taken for granted by the many

¹⁸ Piault, Bernard: *What is the Trinity?* (20th Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism, vol 17), p 156.

is at work: the harmonizing of prayer and of intercourse with others in a single act. We are discovering that the face of Christ Jesus is seen in every human face, and that the Incarnation means the sanctification of matter. This draws out love of men and of the world they live in. The name of the charism of unity is love. Love is the name of the Spirit, the same holy Spirit that unites the Father with the Son in the Trinity, and the members of the Body of Christ with each other. He is the Master of trinitarian prayer.

The classical spirituality of the Church is not negated but unfolded in current treatises. Saint John of the Cross once wrote:

God will give the soul the communication of the holy Spirit who, as one who breathes, raises her by this divine breath, so that she may breathe in God the same breath of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father, which is the same holy Spirit that God breathes in the soul in order to unite her to himself.¹⁹

In the global vision of the twentieth century the social dimension of this gift has opened to our consciousness:

The ultimate source of the whole spiritual dialectic has a name of its own: it is the Logos who prays to the Father in us and who prays to us in mankind in order that we may pray with him to the Father in the Spirit. Thus the final synthesis of all the forms of prayer that we have examined is achieved. For in its full significance, prayer addressed to men is already sacred; and we find ourselves associated with nothing less than the divine prayer, itself in a trinitarian mystery. The prayer that each of us makes to the best element in himself, then that which binds men together in an immense drama of inter-related expression, leads us in fact beyond what we imagined. We join up to the prayer God addresses to himself through created beings. And beyond this divine action in time we have a glimpse of God's inner life in eternity: a life in which prayer is still present but has no other purpose than the mysterious love of the uncreated Persons and the gathering together of all things in them.²⁰

If we hardly know where to begin in the practice of trinitarian prayer, we need only remember that God has promised to take the first step. Speaking for the divine persons, Christ said at the last supper: 'We will come to him and make our abode with him'.²¹ The local home of the infinite Three-in-One is the praying heart.

¹⁹ *Complete Works of St John of the Cross*, Vol II (trans Alison Peers, London, 1934), stanza 39.

²⁰ Nédoncelle, Maurice: *The Name and Use of Prayer* (London, 1964), p 173.

²¹ Jn 14, 23.