THE RHYTHM OF PRAYER AND ACTION

By MICHAEL IVENS

A PAPER ON the subject of prayer might prudently begin with the story of a theologian who ventured to give a public lecture entitled 'Obstacles to prayer'. As the lecture proceeded, obstacle after obstacle fell before the learned onslaught. But meantime the audience became smaller and smaller, until finally everyone had drifted away. They had gone to a nearby church to pray. . . . I was never sure whether this is meant as an edifying tale or a cautionary one. What moral are we intended to draw? That nothing works like good theory?—or that only in prayer itself can the obstacles to prayer be overcome? In fact obstacles to prayer occur on different levels and it may be well to begin with a simple distinction.

The fundamental obstacle to prayer is located in the depths of the heart. Prayer is a relationship, and the deep hindrances to prayer arise from the resistances that keep any relationship shallow and incomplete: caginess, mistrust, self-sufficiency, unwillingness to yield to love, to give over our hearts, to keep nothing back. In any discussion on prayer this must be kept clearly in mind. Otherwise one will become involved in the pelagian exercise of trying to programme and plan a relationship which is God's gift; and which calls, on our side, not for know-how but love.

Other obstacles, however, appear not so much to raise the question of willingness as of possibility. In the conditions of modern life and apostolate, an increasing number of earnest christians—priests, religious and laity alike — feel beset by inexorable forces that seem to conspire to make regular prayer psychologically and physically impossible. The febrile pace of life crowds out the time; lack of privacy makes it difficult to find the place. The quiet place and moment, even when laboriously secured, become invaded by the ant-like army of petty anxieties, stray thoughts and random fantasies that provide contemporary man's habitual irritants. When they consider the odd daily moments salvaged for God, and the all-too-infrequent retreats and days of recollection, such people feel driven to conclude not only that they pray very little but that life seems to debar them from the very situation in which the ascent to God in prayer might happen. It is as though gravity is just too strong.

Those who raise this sort of problem are in no doubt that 'the christian is one who prays'. They are intensely conscious of the need for prayer. And they are troubled precisely because the standard they strive towards and judge themselves by is high. But to recognize this is to be faced with the crucial question: where does the standard come from? From the authentic claim of God's living word? Or from unchallenged, perhaps now forgotten, but all-too-human authority? The importance of distinguishing the one from the other is a recurring theme of spiritual literature. It was said of St Ignatius that 'he thought there was no worse mistake in spiritual things than the desire to lead others as oneself'.[1] Father Faber remarked picturesquely that spiritual books are like steam: when they do harm, they do it on a tremendous scale. Abbot Chapman's quotable dictum, 'Pray as you can, not as you can't', voices a similiar malaise about the perils of coercive influence or uncritical imitation.

What we are being warned against here might be defined as the tendency for a particular approach to prayer or a particular school of spirituality to degenerate into an orthodoxy: 'orthodoxy' being understood not in the technical dogmatic sense, but in the popular sense of a limited theory or praxis invested with disproportionate authority, indiscriminately imposed on others and, as a rule, stoutly barricaded against the influence of alternative views. Doubtless, there are psychological reasons why the orthodoxy appeals to many minds; there is a comfort of sorts in being told what to do, think, even to feel. But orthodoxy is also the by-product of the dialectic between Church and believer in which the Spirit teaches us to pray. For the Spirit operates in two related dimensions: in the heart of each believer, anointed and endowed with understanding; and through the teaching and witness of the Church: the latter being communicated not only formally but through the influence of admired figures, the assumptions implicit in rules and conventions, the climate of groups and communities. Without in some degree learning from the Church what are the 'constants' of God's ways with man, without some exposure to the wisdom of those who have prayed more deeply and analysed their experience more competently than himself, the individual believer's prayer will remain stunted and immature.

But equally, prayer can only develop where the believer has elbow-room to be himself. So there is a right and a wrong way of deferring to

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[1] De Guibert, J.: *The Jesuits: their spiritual doctrine and practice* (trans W. J. Young, Chicago, 1964), p 89.

the retreat-house oracles or the high-priests of literature. All too easily our mentors become dictators, who impose conformity. We admire and imitate just when our emerging spirit-given selfhood demands that we admire and do otherwise. We get saddled with spiritualities we cannot assimilate and dare not repudiate. When this happens, we have fallen victim to one or other of the prayer orthodoxies. Many of the problems people run up against in prayer have their origins here. Let me try to amplify a little further.

The orthodoxy that causes the greatest distress to those who seriously try to pray amid the hurly-burly of apostolic, professional or family life might be characterized by the word 'disengagement'. To anybody formed in conservative circles in the pre-conciliar Church, its characteristic attitudes and praxis will be familiar. Prayer was held well-nigh exclusively to be that meeting with God which takes place when the creature draws apart, physically and mentally, from his ordinary concerns. The natural environment of prayer was solitude, and its mood was marked by interior solitude and silence. Prayer, then, could not accommodate too heavy an invasion of thought or feeling from the realm of ordinary human affairs; and a major function of the discipline of prayer was to rid oneself of distractions. While aridity was not exactly cultivated, feelings tended to be disparaged and one who aimed at a serious life of prayer was warned without ado that the going would be hard. While lip-service was paid to the ideal of 'prayer at all times', in practice the relationship of prayer to action was conceived on a gain-expenditure model: prayer being the time of accumulation and replenishment, action — especially action entailing close relationships or deep involvement in secular affairs — being a rather dangerous spending spree. Fidelity to times of prayer was *de rigeur*, and in the matter of life-style the great bugbear was 'activism'.

This general approach has its basis, of course, in a spiritual tradition which would need rather more nuance than this to summarize, a tradition which has grown and found its formulation largely in the environment of the monastery. No one with any sense of tradition — whether christian, or for that matter, the tradition of any higher religion — would deny that there are basic and perennial truths in this spirituality, even though a modern theologian might want in the same breath to question more than one of the underlying doctrinal assumptions. Yet priests, apostolic religious and lay people, who have tried to direct their lives by the attitudes and programme of this spirituality are becoming increasingly aware that, for their own needs, it leaves too much out and puts the stresses in the wrong places. The

more one recedes from the monastery, the more difficult it becomes to live by a formulation and structuring of prayer that have their origin in a life far removed from the experience and commitments of the secular city.

Yet when we turn to consider some of the alternative routes opened up by more recent developments in spirituality, it is striking to notice how easily these, in their turn, have enfeebled their own insights by acquiring the characteristics of the orthodoxy. A decade or so back, we witnessed an orthodoxy of engagement, a phenomenon which reflects the brief reign of religionless christianity. Engagement orthodoxy was of the most draconian. Prayer, in the sense of time apart, was suddenly at a discount; the advocates of that prayer found themselves almost overnight stigmatized as dualist, metaphysical or pre-technopolitan. The gain-expenditure concept was stood on its head. The prayer which now counted was prayer which happened not in disengagement but in the moments of completest involvement in the secular, human adventure. In fact, this spirituality possessed undeniable value. It was an overdue protest against comfortable christians who mistook fastidiousness for spirituality; it drew attention to the robust, secular and contemporary implications of prayer at all times. Yet as an orthodoxy, it was extraordinarily short-lived. People who were really looking for prayer were quick to discover that the problem of relating prayer and action could not be resolved simply by suppressing the 'and'. The older values of solitude and discipline have since, astonishingly, made a come-back.

But this is not to say that the disengagement approach has turned out, after all, to be generally feasible. The more recent movements of spiritual renewal are tending to look for something more than solitude, discipline, and the rather rarefied, low-key spiritual experience favoured by the older spirituality. More and more people are being encouraged to expect as normal in prayer what was formerly seen as the exception: a definite 'God-experience', a kind of palpable warmth, joy and comfort, an over-all transfiguring of existence. Together with this goes another change of emphasis: from solitude to community. It would be hard to deny that this socialized, experience-orientated spirituality has proved itself beyond question a powerful force for renewal. Yet it is equally clear how easily the modern renewal movements fall into a disregard of the psychological and charismatic variety among people and to a narrowing down of the vast range of God's ways with man.

Traditional disengagement spirituality, the virtual reversal of that spirituality in an engagement-centred approach to prayer, the quest for

a more immediate religious experience: all these avenues have been, and are being, explored by those seeking the solutions to the tensions they meet in prayer. Each has something relevant to say to those problems; each, when espoused as an orthodoxy, is likely to draw the seeker into a blind alley. The alternative is to see these developments as complementary guidelines, valuable though partial insights into God's way with man. In what follows, then, I want to look at some of the difficulties commonly raised by busy people who are also at heart men and women of prayer, and to consider these difficulties in the light of all that is positive in each of the approaches we have been considering so far. This means, in particular, asking what insights are generally valid in the disengagement spirituality which has exercised so decisive an influence on popular attitudes to prayer, and how far this spirituality needs to be modified and complemented. (While there can be no question of trying to relate the rather sketchy reflections that follow to the constants of tradition, I make no apology for a number of citations from Ignatius; had more attention been paid to his spiritual synthesis, we might have considerably fewer problems to contend with.)

Prayer at all times

The first obstacle has to do with the attitudes people adopt towards their lives as a whole. Looked at from the standpoint of our commitment to prayer, how does the complex of work, leisure and relationships that make up our everyday existence appear to us? I suspect that Teilhard was not far from the mark when he said that 'the general run of the faithful dimly feel that man's work is at the level of a spiritual encumbrance, that the best hours of the day are cheapened by material cares, that time spent in the office or in the studio, in the fields or in the factory is time taken away from prayer and adoration'.[2] As long as such a feeling persists, so will the sense (to quote Teilhard again) of 'leading a double or crippled life'.[3] I suggest, then, that one of the busy christian's most fundamental needs is to undertake a positive examination of conscience (how seldom we do examine the conscience in search of the positive!); to see how far his daily round contains moments of quite explicit response to God, moments of hearing and doing the word in his work, decisions and relationships; and how far the Lord is with him in the 'quiet places' which all but the most crowded of our days provide: driving the car, walking the dog, waiting for the bus. For

[2] Teilhard de Chardin, J.: *The Divine Milieu* (London, 1960) p 37.
[3] *Ibid.*

many, such an exercise will reveal a level of prayer that might surprise them; and in any case, by reflecting on life in this way one is made aware that there is one quite feasible way of actually cultivating prayer, without needing to change an iota of one's programme.

It is this that Ignatius recommended to the jesuit scholastics from whom he required an intensive commitment to study: 'they can exercise themselves', he says, 'in seeking the presence of our Lord in all things, such as their conversations, their walks, in all that they see, taste and understand, and in all their actions, since it is true that his divine Majesty is in all things by his presence, power and essence'.[4] Ignatius was poles removed from the casual approach adopted by advocates of engagement spirituality towards prayer structure. And of course his programme for finding God in all things, though perfectly accommodated to the essentials of a busy life, is inconsistent with the compulsive superficiality, the inner restlessness, or the craving for diversion that may be called 'activism'. Nevertheless, Ignatius thought it possible for exceedingly busy people so to live that the bulk of their prayer — in the sense of the greatest quantity of time — would be outside the times set aside for prayer. The possibility is one which challenges us far too radically for easy optimism to be in place. Yet it is a matter of thankfulness that changes of theological and spiritual climate once again make the possibility thinkable.

On this basis we can go on to look at those modes of prayer — we may call them explicit prayer — which required a sustained focusing of the mind and attentiveness of the heart prolonged over time.

Time

The second difficulty stems from the need to set aside time. Few would deny that explicit prayer requires duration. It takes time to assimilate the word of God in scripture, or patiently to ask, seek and knock, or to be drawn into dialogue with God or simply to graze in the green pastures of prayer. Reduced to the level of orthodoxy, this holds clear and practical implications. Each day must contain its generous quota of prayer time, and where the daily quantity of prayer is small, prayer will never achieve the depths available to those who adopt as the norm of daily practice the invitation 'Watch one hour with me'. A more flexible approach will reject this as over-simple, while holding fast to the essential insights enshrined in disengagement spirituality. What might be the guidelines for such an approach?

[4] De Guibert, *loc. cit.*, p 88.

Certainly, the daily prayer programme needs to retain its central place. Such are the pressures that bear upon us that few people indeed could claim to pray as regularly without a schedule as with one. Only within a schedule, faithfully adhered to, will we know the crucial experience of coming before God in prayer even when we recoil from the meeting.

But at the same time, we need to break away from the equiparation of 'short duration' with 'low-grade prayer'. Generosity with our time is relative not just to the clock but to our total situation. A period which for one hardly feels like the passing of time at all may tax another's perseverance almost to the limit. A time of dryness in which one man is able to hold his mind, however painfully, towards an almost totally concealed God, for another rapidly degenerates into vacuous boredom. A prayer quota entirely laudable in a person who might otherwise while away his day with paperbacks, becomes a matter of apostolic, domestic or social irresponsibility in someone committed to a heavy schedule. Nor — once we have acknowledged the need for prayer-time in principle — can we possibly say *how much* time is needed for God to touch his creature in any way, or to draw him into any mode of prayer experience. A striking testimony to the mind of Ignatius on short duration is afforded by his mordant comment on the attempts of a jesuit pressure group to impose a standardized rule of prolonged daily prayer: 'A truly mortified man would find a quarter of an hour ample to unite himself with God in prayer . . . and his quarter of an hour would be better than another man's two hours'.[5] The preference for 'mortification' (the paschal quality of life) over time spent in prayer as a criterion for judging an apostle's worth, is characteristic of Ignatius.

But there is another consideration. Ignatius, who at times could stand so lightly to the 'arithmetic' of the spiritual life, appears in a very different light in the Spiritual Exercises, with their stress on the exact fulfilment of five hours of daily prayer. In the Exercises, the fledgling apostle disengages himself from the concerns of the world to devote himself to intensive prayer in a physical and psychological environment quite other than that of his ordinary apostolic existence, with its travel, interruptions, relationships and immediate preoccupations. The Exercises, to be sure, were for once in a lifetime. Yet their place at the heart of the apostolic life seems to have something of the paradigm about it, helping us to grasp some of the complex and variegated

[5] *Ibid.*, p 89.

commitments of apostolic spirituality. First — and imperatively — we are reminded that the impossibility of devoting long periods to prayer daily does not dispense us from the need for more protracted prayer at times. But we are also reminded that the value of longer periods of time-exposure, deeper repose and more extended reflection is not nullified by the fact that these periods may be comparatively widely spaced. The days when we do more are not a judgment on the days when we do less or a guilty catching-up on neglected duties; rather, they form part of an existence in which the patterns of prayer, like the patterns of work, leisure and friendship, fall into wider cycles than the twenty-four hour round.

In the modern world — and I am thinking, I suppose, particularly of the student world — the daily cycle is no longer, as it used to be, the unit from which organized life is built. Twenty-four hour rhythms are overlaid by the more significant alternations of term and vacation, spates of activity and times of recuperation; the night is no longer sacrosanct, free days are irregular, formal meals occasional rather than daily rituals. Where such life-patterns prevail, it is not strange that patterns of prayer should similarly be more complex than those which seemed appropriate to a simpler and more structured age.

Distraction

Of course, to structure time is merely to set up the conditions for prayer. People who complain of difficulties will go on at this point to raise a more basic problem. In the time of prayer they do not seem to meet God at all, but only their own thoughts, fantasies and emotions; they are just, in Hopkin's phrase, 'their sweating selves'. They complain that their prayer is constantly beset with distractions, distractions which vocal prayer and meditation seem equally powerless to dispel.

To such problems, the standard replies are indispensable, and yet at the same time not quite adequate. Rightly, the traditional mentor will stress the need for some degree of mind-control, some sort of discipline over the trivial and irrelevant. He will insist, too, on the element of suffering in prayer, the painful yet purificatory times of search and absence, the deserts and the nights. Yet both points may fail to meet the real, though inarticulate, needs often concealed behind the reiterated complaints about distraction and aridity. Further inquiry sometimes reveals that there is a simple misconception at work, a false problem not uncommon where the more unqualified presentations of disengagement

spirituality have been in the ascendant. And sometimes what is being expressed is a particularly critical existential predicament.

Distraction as a false problem comes from driving a wedge between prayer-experience and other realms of awareness. No one, of course, seriously suggests that our feelings and preoccupations have no place at all in prayer. But one sometimes detects a reluctance to press the point far enough; and all too frequently one hears the complaint that at a particular moment prayer is made impossible — or at any rate cheapened — because a pressing problem or a strong feeling 'refuses to go away'. One can only hope that eventually fastidiousness of this kind will cease to be with us, and that the simple and fundamental point which modern existential spirituality is coming increasingly to emphasize will gradually be taken by everyone: that God communicates himself to man at the heart of the human condition and in his present situation. Ignatius well knew how rich a meeting with God might be occasioned by the need to make a quite ordinary, perhaps just mildly costly, choice; how the christian who accepts the reality of his present responsibility encounters the reality of God in a whole cluster of prayer relationships: petition, listening, trust, acceptance, consolation. With regard to the feelings, wanted or otherwise, that obtrude into our prayer, we have the valuable insights of a proliferating literature dedicated to exploring the terrain of prayer in the light of psychology. And if the interest here is sometimes located rather in the psychology than in the prayer, it serves to bring home to us the truth so vividly proclaimed throughout the bible (the psalmist, the prophets, Moses, Job and Paul being particularly instructive illustrations), that there is a true and profound meeting with God in accepting, handling and working through our emotions: the 'bad' ones such as anger, jealousy, disappointment and anxiety, as well as the more welcome ones.

So those who complain that the world is too much with them in their prayer often need simply to learn that in prayer one meets the God of history who speaks to us precisely in what is untidy, unwanted and unforeseen in our experience. But when this is said, we must recognize that sometimes the difficulty goes deeper than this. It does seem that people who complain today about difficulties in prayer are in a situation that people of an earlier generation find hard to understand. Their problem is not that first fervour has evaporated, that they have become tepid, that they have failed to build on early foundations, but rather that prayer has never come alive for them at all. They have seldom, if ever, picked up the word of God as a distinctive reality at the heart of their experience. They have never really known the prayer

that immerses the mind and heart in faith-meaning. It is as though, for all their aspirations, they remain locked in the experiental confines of a world caught up in the immediate, ill at ease with deep levels of awareness, a prey to over-stimulation, insensitive to ultimate reality.

I would not claim to suggest an easy answer to the difficulties of this situation. But by way of conclusion, I want to suggest that an important element in the answer is one to which contemporary trends in spirituality are increasingly coming to point: the creation of a viable religious culture for the contemporary christian.

Culture

At the moment we are emerging from the aftermath of a doctrinaire repudiation of a distinctive religious culture, a repudiation that had some justification in so far as popular culture had become fussy, unaesthetic and in many ways outmoded. Yet the immediate outcome was that many christians were left to lead their lives in something of a vacuum. Small wonder, then, that they found it hard to retain the rhythms, habits of mind and sensibility that prayer requires. Current renewal movements are concerned to set this state of affairs to rights. And while we need to circumvent the dangers of new orthodoxies, new pressures to conform, it must obviously concern us all that the pattern of christianity in general — and of our own christian lives in particular — move beyond the situation of cultural deprivation.

When we look at the culture actually in the making, the scene that confronts us is enormously variegated, exciting, yet still inchoate, precarious and fragmentary, with promise greatly in the ascendant over fulfilment. Undoubtedly the most significant element is the proliferation of groups, which for growing numbers of people are leading to new possibilities of regular prolonged prayer.

But it is important to be aware of the desiderata to be sought and the pitfalls to be avoided if a culture is to develop which will really help contemporary christians to find their own ways of prayer. The culture we must work for will have to be supportive yet not restrictive. It must not lose sight of the difference between spiritual life and an interest in spirituality, between prayer and mere interest in methods. Yet the very diversity of the situation, containing as it does straight survivals, refurbished traditions and new developments, gives ground for the hope that tomorrow's christian, though the fundamental obstacles in the heart will be with him always, will be less beset on the way of prayer by the misdirection or lack of support that in the past have made the ways of prayer needlessly daunting.