

Prayer rooted in our humanity

George Guiver

WHAT WOULD LIFE HAVE BEEN LIKE if we had been born deaf, dumb and blind? It is difficult to imagine the level of human consciousness to which we would be limited. Putting ourselves in the place of people who have those tragic disabilities can make us realize how much we owe to our senses. That might seem a very obvious thing to say, but the familiar can become less familiar the closer we look at it. It is a common experience to give such concentrated attention to an ordinary English word that it suddenly becomes new territory. New, unthought-of significations can become apparent, and even the very sound of the word becomes unfamiliar, as a foreigner might hear it. If we give that kind of concentrated attention to our relationship with the physical life in which we swim, a similar insight can become increasing self-evident.

Daily with my hands I feel shapes, textures and movement, with my ears I receive an unremitting flow of sound and speech, while through my eyes an amazing stream of pictures colours every waking moment through the miracle of vision. All these things have made me what I am, and continue that moulding of me. We can be left asking, 'Is there anything in us which is not indebted to sensual reality?' Whenever I engage in apparently abstract activity by closing my eyes and shutting out all sight and sound, I am still 'wired up' in every direction to this sensual hurly-burly. Our living is bodily, and for the purposes of the following discussion I will call this area of life-experience 'bodily living'. The more we stop to take stock of it, the more striking becomes the realization of its pervasiveness in the fabric of who we are.

We have become what we are as Christians through our senses

The inward journey of prayer, shutting out the sights and sounds of the world, is firmly part of the Christian tradition, amply testified to from the earliest of the Fathers if not before. It has, however, been open to a temptation most beguiling to the western tradition: the belief that we can put aside the physical world and enter upon a 'purely spiritual' liaison with God. Contemplative prayer, however, is informed through and through by 'bodily living', that swirling

ocean of sensate engagement with creation which is our every breathing moment. It is right, then, to ask ourselves how we can pray in a way which takes our 'bodily living' seriously and avoids that illusion of spiritual flight from the world.

One way of framing this question is to ask how our prayer can be more rooted in our humanity. Here we must beware, empty vessels that we are. Left to our own resources we are incapable of prayer. In many contemporary approaches there lurks a danger of canonizing our humanity, making it the fundamental theme of prayer and indeed its very basis. There is only one humanity in which our prayer can be rooted, and that is Christ's. He both judges and redeems our 'bodily living', having plunged into it and assumed it himself. His incarnation shows us the way: it sets the principle that physical and spiritual are inseparable, and that God has identified himself with the created order, bringing together creation and redemption in one single movement. From the incarnation issued the sacramental order, the framework within which we live and pray as Christians. We are able to talk about rooting prayer in our humanity when we take the incarnation and the sacraments as basic – for their content is Christ himself.

The Paschal Mystery

Reading a gospel straight through, we can be struck by its rapidly moving events. Events are the material out of which the teaching emerges. After the cross and resurrection the disciples were left with a picture of God that bore the strong stamp of these events. Whenever they prayed, a dominant influence was a continuing experience of those events, alive and well in their bloodstream, and these events were their knowledge of Jesus.

The connection between sacraments and saving events has been made in a very revealing way in the Mystery-theology of Dom Odo Casel.¹ Drawing as he does on the habitual language of the early Church, Casel insists that the Christ we know today in our Christian communities is the very same Christ the apostles knew. We are not simply left to take on trust from the apostles the fact that he was amazing to be with: we are enabled to join them in their being with him. In the liturgy we re-live the events, and we encounter and engage with the Christ of those events in person. This language has, over the years, stirred up no small amount of controversy, but in recent years Mystery-theology has begun again to claim people's attention. The centenary of Casel's birth in 1986 saw a spate of writ-

ing in Germany on the subject, not least Arno Schilson's exhaustive work, *Theologie als Sakramententheologie*.² In France Casel has had an enthusiastic following from the start. In the English-speaking world on the other hand he remains relatively little known. There is some catching up for English-speakers to do, not least because of characteristically down-to-earth, incarnational insights they can bring to the debate.

Casel's thinking lies behind Vatican II's language of the 'Paschal Mystery', and has found its way into the liturgical language of the mainstream denominations. It is now a commonplace to say that in the liturgy we participate in the saving events by reliving the Paschal Mystery. We need to avoid the word 'experience' here, because Casel insisted we are not dealing simply with religious experience. Rather, the whole of ourselves participates in something which can only be assessed in the long term, not in the here and now in any particular service. We are also dealing with realities which are first of all objective rather than subjective. This raises many questions, not least that of how the events can be present in the liturgy.³

Prayer rooted in our humanity

For the purposes of the present discussion, Casel gives us a fruitful basis on which to think about prayer rooted in our humanity. First he does this in drawing attention to the frequent use of the word 'mystery' in the New Testament, in reference to Christ as God's hidden plan for his creation. We can take the argument a little further than Casel does. If Christ is the Mystery of God hidden in all creation and finally made manifest in the incarnation, then in what I have called 'bodily living' Christ is present but hidden, unrecognized. He is present amongst all the people and events of every day, and thus they are holy. While their holiness is relative, to the degree that Christ is hidden, impaired or denied in them, we can still say that all of life in this sense is holy. The Mystery (Christ) is there within it, waiting to be revealed. Our humanity is a proper subject and springboard for our prayers when it is seen in this way.

Second, the saving events transform the situation, making manifest the Mystery. This revealing of the hidden Mystery then continues in the sacramental order, where we are put in direct contact with Christ in his incarnation, ministry, cross, resurrection and so on. We re-live them with him when we gather for the liturgy. This is prayer further rooted in our humanity through being rooted in the

Church. The Church has its own version of 'bodily living', its own swirling stream of life in which we swim.

Daily life and the Body of Christ are thus bound together. We need both of them in order to make sense of the incarnation. In addition, each needs the other: worship in the Body of Christ opens our eyes to see Christ in the created order, and names him for what he is. When we are rightly disposed, worship gradually causes the scales to fall from our eyes, and schools us in a reverence for all things. Daily life, on the other hand, shows us what we need. It gives us hunger for God, and it judges the Church and her liturgy against the criterion of our common humanity. Some of our more earnest and high-flown attempts at prayer, for instance, need healthy comparison with the way we relate to friends and family: do we stare all the time at people we are talking with, concentrating on them with all our powers? Not very often. Why should we expect always to be like that with God?

Our relating with each other is much more unselfconscious, oblique and physical (body language, bunches of flowers, dancing, the nuanced messages of gesture and bearing) and the things which come closest to that in the Church are the sacraments and sacramentals. I obviously exaggerate, for prayer to God is necessarily distinctive, yet it cannot be unrelated to our humanity. We do well always to ask, when we are talking about prayer, how it compares with our relating with our fellow humans, for we are not called suddenly to be something else when we pray.

Sacraments as graced encounter

I have implied that the sacraments are rooted in our humanity, and we can now say a little more about this. Since the Middle Ages we have been used to talking about the sacraments as special modes for the dispensing of grace. That is of course what they are, but we can often speak as if grace were a shapeless substance that could, as it were, be cut up in lengths. In all the sacraments we receive dollops of it.

Thanks in no small measure to Casel, we have now come to talk about grace in a different way, as inseparable from the person of Christ. In the liturgy we participate in the saving events, and we participate in them in Christ. What is going on is not just an injection of divine grace, but a graced encounter, a graced participation, which has a different character in each of the sacraments, closely linked with each sacrament's nature and form.

But we have to go further and say that we have diminished the sacraments by bleeding their context white. In the eucharist, for instance, the whole liturgy is sacrament, and all of it is presence. There is a real presence in the Word, in the people, and in the liturgical action. This does not downgrade Christ's real presence in the bread and the wine: breathtakingly, indeed, it expands it. Because the whole liturgy is sacramental, our grasp of the mystery of the bread and wine is immeasurably deepened and transformed by this light from the Fathers brought to us by Casel.

I once went to a eucharist in a foreign country where a hospital chapel was being blessed. The distribution of communion was a kind of scrum. The hospital staff and the 'great and the good' from the locality had come in their Sunday best, but to a liturgy which was of a more perfunctory nature, celebrated in a tradition which had come to think that the only important thing about it was Christ coming to us in the bread and wine. If the whole liturgy is seen as sacramental presence, however, it will be done with such care, and such delight in its sacredness that the presence at its heart will be made to shine out more boldly through the nature of that presence's liturgical context.

The whole of Christian living as sacramental

This view of sacramentality tends to strain the limits of the traditional conception of sacraments as being limited to two or seven. In the early Middle Ages, before the rather arbitrary seven became established, we find a wide range of things referred to as sacraments: the reading of the Gospel, the funeral liturgy, the life of monks and nuns, for instance. This takes us far from a uniform distribution of shapeless grace, towards a world in which the infinite creativity of God gives us sacraments great and small, differing not only in degree and importance, but also in character. To participate in the solemn reading of the Gospel takes us along a distinctively different road of grace from the giving of the Peace or the receiving of Communion, even while it is all the one Christ, the Christ the disciples knew in Galilee, risen from the dead and glorified in heaven. While the position of the major sacraments has been honoured by making a distinction between them and sacramentals, there is need for a way of making the distinctions more nuanced.

If all of worship is sacrament, then we find ourselves going even further and saying that the whole of Christian living is sacramental. Life in the Body of Christ is one great sacrament, and therefore we

find since the time of the Second Vatican Council a frequent reference to the Church as sacrament. A sacramental vision of the whole of life in the Body of Christ would by this logic comprehend everything, from flower-arranging to council meetings, from the life of the priest to the life of the dedicated Christian living out their baptism in their workplace. For Christians, the Church's life flows in our bloodstream in the same sensual way as 'bodily living', but in a way which reveals the hidden God.

Our prayer flows out of this life-stream, and a few examples may help to illustrate this. One of the things which make prayer real is our bond with other Christians. At an unconscious level our prayer is populated with people. Just as children reveal habits in their behaviour which are typical of their parents, so a large part of our behaviour, habits and attitudes have been planted in us by our brushing, struggling, living with others. We inhere in each other, mould each other and determine each other's future course by continuing influences. The face of God as God appears to me in prayer is inseparable from people. As illustration, we only have to think of those of us who have difficulty in envisaging God as Father because of a difficult relationship with their own father.

Liturgy – setting the scene for the perception of God

Another element in the face of God is the liturgy. Daily prayer, the words of the psalms, the offering of the mysteries at the Lord's table, the common liturgical action, all are a primary part of God's countenance in prayer. When I am praying alone, the liturgy secretly sets the scene of my perceptions of God.

Following from that is the whole life of the Church as a culture. For many Christians the church building and its history, church art and traditions, and the rich matrix of church life, are so close to the heart of what Christianity means, that they can say that for them they are part of the countenance of God. For some Christians this is a major element in their faith. The Curé d'Ars spent time and money adding to the beauty of his church out of sheer enthusiasm for its gift of manifesting something of the face of God. So the church building, shrines and holy places are prayer, prayer which is sacramental.

Undergirding all of this is the great corpus of Scripture, tradition and doctrine – the dimension of the word. In this great Word we are given part of our vision of the face of God. Every icon is visual theology, and all prayer itself is theology. In liturgical circles there

is some current debate about which comes first, prayer or theology. Aidan Kavanagh would say that prayer in the liturgy is 'primary theology'.⁴ Out of that emerges verbal reflection on the experience: 'secondary theology'. It is secondary theology which is contained in our theology books and taught in universities. Primary theology, worship, is the basic experience out of which the words of theology arise. Kavanagh would say that worship comes first, and secondary theology follows from and should depend upon it.

The problem with this theory is that life does not work in such neatly linear ways – it tends more to circle and spiral, and it would be more true to say that it is impossible to disentangle the two types of theology. The 'experience' which we gain (or claim to gain) in prayer always has in it some element of self-reflection, some mental account-taking of what is going on, some thought about God. Conversely, theology as taught, say, in a university, cannot be separated from worship. Otherwise it would be like trying to study music in the nearby music department without listening to music. Many a student has found that the study of a Gospel along with a commentary engenders in them a spirit of prayer. Theology inevitably informs our prayers. Contemplation in silence is made possible by many past arguments and struggles in classrooms and councils of the Church. Theology is part of that great sweep of life of the Church in which we swim and pray.

Christ the sacrament of God

These are examples of the way our prayerful relation with God arises out of the life, paraphernalia and thought of the Church. Images from worship, teaching and Scripture are constantly rolling over us, embodying the Gospel, embedding it in our senses. They are a Christian version of 'bodily living', but also more: an outpouring of grace. Traditional sacramental theology and, interestingly, modern theory on the function of symbols, speak of a close identity between the sign and that which is signified: the pouring of water in baptism does not simply point towards an inward washing – it *is* the washing. The bread *is* the Lord's body. The kind of 'bodily living' we experience in the Church brings something new – it is not simply another version of 'bodily living', but a new creation. This new creation's newness is Christ.

One of the great advances of recent years has been the recovery of a sacramental understanding of Christ himself. Christ is the foundation sacrament. In the incarnation he is 'the sacrament of God'.⁵

In Caselian language he is the Mystery, and whenever we worship within the Church, whenever we pray in that life-stream, we engage with Christ. The Mystery-life of the Church gives us the whole Christ, even if it can never encompass him. Given that caveat, we can say that he is the sacraments. He is the one sacrament of which the many sacraments are the unfolding.

From this perspective we can now discern a scheme within which the former division between a profane world and a sacred Church (some parts more sacred than others) is replaced by a unity between creation and redemption.

First of all God is present in his creation, but in a hidden way. The 'bodily life' which through sight and sound deeply affects how we think and live is inhabited by God, is God at work. But in it God is hidden, not named. Then Christ draws us to recognize God in it, but that changes us for ever, so that we start to become the Church, the place where the hidden God begins to be made manifest. The Church, most especially in her liturgy, makes explicit what is already implicit in the world around us. In this new creation our eyes are opened so that we are able to name the presence of Christ in daily 'bodily living' and engage with him there.

Consequences for prayer

If the Church is sacrament, then the liturgy before our eyes is the very presence of Christ's Mystery. This may be easy to feel in the beautiful liturgy of a cathedral or monastery, but we also have to realize it too at a parish eucharist, where the serving is less studied, the music less artistic, and the everyday peeps out at the edges, like the trainers of the servers beneath their cassocks. What we are seeing and touching *is* the presence, is sacrament. It is Christ before our eyes. The liturgy may be a visual aid for our deeply private, personal inner journey, but it is much more than that. Odo Casel was convinced from his reading of the Fathers that we need to develop a habit of mind which takes for granted the effective objectivity of the sacramental order. Our parish Sunday mass, just as we do it, is Christ visibly and tangibly present.

Objective and subjective are bound to each other. A heightened externality has to go together with a movement towards inwardness. Our inner life is part and parcel of 'bodily living', for where our heart is, there will our treasure be also. The quality of our celebration is therefore of the greatest importance. Perfunctory performance is always a travesty, while taking care about worship's

beauty and worthiness is part of the sacramental principle. One brother in our community always puts a little salt on his fruit. Surprisingly, this brings out the fruit's flavour. The quality of worship assists or impedes the bringing-out of the juices within it. The careful and attentive celebration of the liturgy by all concerned enables Christ to make himself known in it, while careless performance draws a mask over him.

What we sometimes call 'externals' are in fact internal. They are not optional extras, but part of the unfolding of the rose of worship. Candles, liturgical processions, the vesting of ministers, and a host of traditions of the calendar and of popular tradition, are all part of that unfolding. In Orthodoxy prayer can take the form of repeated prostrations for half an hour. St Teresa was brought to admit that a nun who could not pray in silence was truly contemplating by repeating the Lord's Prayer. Lighting of candles, praying before icons or statues, holding special services and devotions, are all forms of prayer which have been dismissed too easily in recent years. Growing scholarly interest in popular piety is beginning now to do justice to the human needs which gave rise to such practices.⁶ We live bodily, and need to pray bodily.

Our private prayer when we are alone is not the alone speaking to the Alone, but engagement with the God of the liturgy. In seeking prayer rooted in our humanity we are led to talk about the Church and the liturgy as essential and distinctive conditions for that prayer, but these must be a church and a liturgy which constantly turn their attention to the ordinary things of daily living.

The world can never be shut out of Christian worship, even if we delude ourselves that it can be. Without 'bodily living' there would be no liturgy, no human beings, no Jesus of Nazareth. Conversely, it is a mistake to think our task is to make the liturgy as like daily life as possible. The Christian liturgy is a 'new creation', of a different order from anything else in life, with the power through that to open our eyes to the sacredness of all things. It will always be different, distinct, and ultimately incomprehensible. What we can be certain of is that life and liturgy, humanity and prayer, belong together in our engagement with the Christ who is God incarnate.

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NOTES

1 The only book currently available in English is *The mystery of Christian worship, and other writings*, edited by B. Neunheuser (DLT, 1962). The translation, however, is not always reliable, and fails to capture the vigour of Casel's style. A fuller bibliography can be found in G. Guiver, *Pursuing the mystery: worship and daily life as presences of God* (SPCK, 1996).

2 A. Schilson, *Theologie als Sakramententheologie: die Mysterientheologie Odo Casels* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1987).

3 In *Pursuing the mystery* I have shown how, from a variety of points of view, this language not only makes sense but ties in with basic human experience of life.

4 Aidan Kavanagh, *On liturgical theology* (New York: Pueblo, 1984).

5 See for instance E. Schillebeeckx, *Christ the sacrament of the encounter with God* (Sheed & Ward, 1963, 1989).

6 See for instance P. L. Malloy, 'The re-emergence of popular religion among non-Hispanic American Catholics', *Worship* 72/1 (January 1998), pp 2-25.