

# THE PERSONAL PRAYER OF THE PRIEST

By MICHAEL KYNE

**M**OST PRIESTS have experienced the difference between, for example, prayerfully attending the Holy Week services at the seminary, on the one hand, with all the advantages and helps of an excellent choir, altar staff, homilies and so on, and, on the other hand, presiding at the same services in a parish after ordination, with inadequate means, the need to improvise, while at the same time trying to keep the order of service in mind, shepherd the servers and think about a homily. Likewise, most priests have lived experience of the contrast between prayer in the seminary, with Office in common and meditation in one's room or the chapel at the start of an ordered seminary day, and, on the other hand, prayer in the parish, which usually means Office alone and conditions in which interruptions and multiple duties seem to make peaceful, fruitful accomplishment impossible. Because of these contrasting experiences, priests' lives can easily contain much guilt about prayer. The guilt is reinforced by retreats which attempt, for a few days, to resuscitate the calm old seminary model of prayer. And this guilt can occur, even though a priest might know that the past seminary set-up would not in fact fit his present life and circumstances; that the same model would not be of use to most people in his parish whom he is called to help to pray; and even though he may have found that by active participation in the liturgy as a server or as a member of the choir in the seminary he felt more at ease and closer to God than when he was a less active attender in the pew. This last experience is a fact which, though ambiguous, could be significant, and I will return to it later.

All this is not meant to deny that the seminary slant on prayer and its practice may in some cases be right and helpful for many priests later on, nor that it has abiding values. This cannot be excluded any more than one can exclude the possibility that a priest might find a benedictine, dominican or jesuit way of prayer right and helpful. Each of them is *one* way into the riches of Christ and the Church's prayer, a way which has proved lastingly and repeatedly valid for some temperaments through the centuries. Each can claim, at least implicitly, to be the way for persons whose external life bears some likeness to the original, or who are attracted to one of the major emphases that are to be found in the originals. If, however, to take

an example, a diocesan priest accepts such claims uncritically and tries to adopt, say, a monastic pattern of prayer in a parish setting, the model can turn into an abiding condemnation and source of guilt about what he actually does within his life of prayer. It remains an ideal that is for ever unattainable. It is not that the pattern in itself is wrong; rather it is unsuited for the priest's actual circumstances.

To return now to the point I made earlier, that a priest may feel that he was more at ease and closer to God when taking an active part in seminary liturgy as a member of the choir or an altar server than when he was simply a member of the congregation. Although it is true that external activity can (like most other things, including ways of praying) be an evasion from deep surrender to God in prayer, it is not necessarily so and it must be recognized in this context that there are contemplative and non-contemplative temperaments. Neither of these is normative nor fully christian. Both of them have their dangers and need completing and balancing up in time. So it could be that a person rightly finds that movement (as for instance in the stations of the cross), variety and multiple quiet activity are what help to prolong prayer most, even though the *Cloud of unknowing* or St John of the Cross would frown on this.

It is important, therefore, to clarify what model enshrines our ideal of prayer and whether it does so rightly. What do we see as our ideal: a Carthusian or a busy parent who loves God and the family?

#### *Prayer the microcosm*

Prayer is the summing up of a life of response to God. It is an assertion in faith, hope and love about the ultimate focus and aim of that life, a focus and an aim that underlie and are found within all its many activities. It is an approach to the source of a person's ability to live that life of response to God in all its aspects in the way in which God wants it.

When we are thinking about prayer, therefore, it might be best for all of us to look at our real life with its circumstances, with the tasks given to us by our vocation and by our call to exercise that vocation in a particular setting at the present moment. Our task is to say ever more completely — as Christ did, and by the power of Christ — a human 'Yes', full of trust and adoration, to that real life in the whole of its reality as it is given to us by the Father. This 'Yes' will be our basic, continuing prayer. This does not mean that we accept the present, the *status quo* as if it were an absolute. God's will embraces both inert matter and human creativity. He has set them together, and our 'Yes' is a double one, both 'passive' and 'active', both accepting and working to change.

Let us look more closely at this. Our 'Yes' implies in the first place a loyal willingness to do what we see step by step, in the light of Christ and through other stimuli, to grow, to improve ourselves, to plan and execute our christian apostolate as best we can, to pray and to take some relaxation so that we may continue our work with some joy. It implies giving ourselves to others, inviting their freedom, caring for them in their wholeness as individuals and for the communities of which they are members, especially the Church. Secondly, and more deeply, our 'Yes' entails our loving acceptance of a self which remains weak and limited; of a parish which as community and as individuals, will never grow at the pace or in the way we think it should. It means accepting the frustration of our plans which cannot cope with all the elements and complexities involved, especially the freedom of others. It also means accepting the ways of God which will never harmonize perfectly with good-hearted human aims and norms of efficiency. Our ideals so often become idols for us, and the idols will have to be broken if prayer and life are gradually to coincide. This 'passive' aspect may be summed up as loving within — and with — what we cannot change, a loving acceptance of the lasting fact in the history of redemption that 'My strength is made perfect in weakness'.

'Formal' prayer is a microcosm of the larger reality. In the tiny compass of our prayer we live out our double 'Yes' more deliberately and fully as we make our plans for prayer and accept their failure through interruptions, tiredness or our own dividedness. From that small setting of prayer our response to God grows out with more refinement through our lives as a whole.

*Prayer, gratitude, love*

As long as we remain in Christ, we can accept all reality as gift and as useful for our task as priests. This is possible because of Christ and of the way in which he accomplished the redemption of us all and of our universe: by activity and utter acceptance, even when this activity was thwarted by human limitation and sin; by using both joy and pain of every sort as the groundwork of his love, now in great actions and now in the weakest gestures.

A priest's life can increasingly become a prayer of gratitude for the providence of our Father and gratitude for the human and other 'ministers' of that providence. As we endeavour to meet and respond to people and situations in their full reality, which includes this 'ministerial' aspect, we will meet both them and God. And we can deepen this perception if we recall that all was created in and for Christ. This means that everything, in its deepest individuality, is

what it is because of *that* relationship with Christ which includes all those other relationships that shape and define a creature.

At the heart of this gratitude is the astounding recognition, which comes to us above all through our faith in Christ, that God gives himself in love to us and that he is on our side for ever, despite our weakness and lasting flaws. Surprised and shamed by such a love, we can both revel in the gratuitous love that we receive from others, and yet, at the same time, not demand, manipulate or cling to this love. For even if the gratuitous love given to us by others were absent, its absence would not cancel out our value which God's love has lastingly affirmed.

In the power of that love, we ourselves can offer love gratuitously to others. And shaped by it, we can lovingly proclaim that we are irrevocably on the side of all those other people, though we see their faults quite clearly and may in fact and at times be injured by them. While remaining loyal to the basic love which comes to us from God himself and is embodied in our call, we can attempt to discover what love of the people and the whole reality around us demands by way of expression, whether through direct affirmation or through forgiveness.

Hence our 'formal' prayer will naturally be one of 'letting go', of accepting and giving love in faith. This will be so even in times when we do not really feel that love either in our personal history or through the life and word of Jesus.

#### *Jesus and the prayer of the priest*

The New Testament gives us many summaries of our Lord's life and of the attitudes which shaped it, as, for example 'He emptied himself out' (Phil 2); 'he did not please himself' (Rom 15,3), and 'I always do what is pleasing to (the Father)' (Jn 8,29). These can be viewed in different lights: either as a proclamation of grim self-denial, for they will sometimes — as in the Garden of Gethsemane — be extremely costly; or without denying that cost, they can be seen as entirely human and 'natural'. For everyone who falls in love takes, more or less fully, another person as the centre of his or her life. He gives himself to and tries to please that person. Gradually all his activities are governed and modified by that all-important love. And so it was with Jesus above all others. His life was a unity and wholly a giving of himself in love to his Father, as he worked for others according to his Father's will. Of course, there existed in him a desire to be, as fully as was humanly possible, alone with his Father; in other words, to be undividedly in touch with and to rest in the source and goal of his love, for this was the place where he was most fully himself. This accounts for those times of exclusive

attention to his Father, those periods of 'formal prayer' which expressed most fully the 'extended prayer' of his every moment.

As priests, we too are drawn into that sort of life, one which is gradually unified by a single, overmastering love which takes in all we do and in fact decides both what we do and how we do it. If, by gift, we truly love the Lord, it follows that we would like to be with him with full attention for some time every day. But it gradually matters less and less whether on particular days we are free to do that as much as we like, or whether instead we are called to please him by meeting the needs of those around us, answering the phone or doorbell or attending to some business matter. The whole becomes our prayer. However, it is especially when we are tired out through our work that we will want to return — at least briefly — to the Centre which gives significance and purpose to all that labour: to go as empty men, weary of love, to the only one who loved to the end.

This is true, of course, only on two conditions. The first is that we *want*, at least to some degree, to pray in the normal sense of the word, so that our activity is not an evasion from the naked faith, hope and love which in time is the usual stuff of prayer and which we can find hard. The second condition is that our aim in all that we do is an increasingly simple one: to please the Father. This last will mean that we come to eliminate all other motives as the mainspring of our actions. Thus, on the psychological level, we will become truly and increasingly altruistic, although hidden selfish motives will also gradually become visible, and although we know that all right love cannot but be to our advantage in the end.

In actual fact, however, we will clearly never be able to unify and unite ourselves; it is God who achieves this in us. And it appears that the prayer of faith, which is increasingly a 'waste of time' in the sense that it is validated *only* by our belief in the loving, present God, will be what brings about and sustains in us a simple aim of faith and love in everything we undertake.

*Prayer within life: meeting Christ in the Church*

In all that I have said so far, two things are implied: the first is that prayer is our meeting, by faith and love, with a God who is in fact present in the whole of our lives whether we recognize him or ignore him. The second is that the central reality in which we meet God is Christ.

The gospel resurrection narratives appear to be replying to the question which they themselves put to us: do you want to meet the Christ who lived and died like this? And their answer is: you will meet him in the scriptures, in the community of the apostles, in the

eucharist and in the mission which Christ gives to you and to his other followers. That is to say, you will meet him in the Church. There, without any special gifts of prayer, you will meet and live with him, if you respond to all these realities in faith. You will also meet him particularly in those special focal points of the presence of Christ that the gospels underline: the poor, the imprisoned, the sick and so on (as in Mt 25,31-46).

Since many busy priests, even with good will, will not have the physical or psychological strength to undertake lengthy personal prayer daily in addition to the tasks involved in their normal duties properly done, it seems vital that they pray within that work. For a full-time minister in the Church, such as a priest is today, it is of the utmost importance that he find God above all in that Church. It is in that setting of the Church that priests, even more clearly than the people whom they serve, live their real lives, enter into Christ's passion and resurrection, receive and give human and divine love. Some examples will show what I mean.

Entirely traditionally, it can be in preparing our homily that we find Christ in prayer. As we desire to hear what he is saying to us and to the people whom we have come to 'know by name' in their actual circumstances, and as we struggle to express his message significantly and faithfully by his grace, we will in fact be praying. If our eyes are on him and on his people as called by him, our necessary study of scripture and theology will be an inescapable 'place' of prayer.

Those people, too, who are actually or potentially his community, when met in a faith which asserts their destiny and deep capacity in the light of the risen Christ, will be a 'place' of prayer. Whether or not they respond to our present invitations to their freedom, and even if our respect and affection for them seem quite useless as we visit them and offer them such help as these attitudes suggest, still we know that they are his. Our very powerlessness will also drive us to rely on him, the sole saviour. That is to say, both they and we will become places in which Christ is met, as we make our round of visits.

This is true above all as we make our 'sick calls'; but it is also valid as we administer the sacraments in the parish church. As we give out communion, perhaps to hundreds at a time, it seems important — if this is not to be a rushed and meaningless chore — that we enter into Christ's 'handing himself over'. As we hand him over, we also hand over ourselves to the service of his people both within and outside the Mass. Thus we take up in a living way the words spoken to us at ordination: 'Recognize what you are doing; imitate the one whom you handle'.

Similarly, in those places where there are still hours of work in the confessional every week, if we are not to give way to tired boredom and impatience but to mediate humanly the concern of Christ whose forgiveness we impart, it is vital that we pray for the people as they come to us for the sacrament and as they leave us. And it is vital that we thus open ourselves to the Lord who works through us.

As a final example, our daily Office must become *our* prayer. It is through the Office that we widen our view to take in the whole Church and the whole human race, that we expand the range of our reactions in prayer and that we unite ourselves with Christ whose redeeming work includes prayer as well as sacrifice and return to the Father.

In all these activities, we are united in faith to Christ who goes on doing the work of our redemption. But since much of our time is spent in work which of itself is not strictly religious, it seems important that we also widen our perception of Christ to embrace him as Creator as well as Redeemer. He both did ordinary human work and preached his Father's truth. Very early on he was seen to be the creative wisdom of God as well as God's saving Power. It is with this *one* Christ that we are united, the Christ who wrought redemption within creation, and both in creating and in redeeming he is an active, working God. Hence, using our own personal powers and gifts, which come to us continuously from his hand, we meet him and are united with him, whether we are doing normal human chores or strictly religious work. Provided that our aim and means are his, and that we do not seek ourselves, our union in activity with that working Master will be true and continuous prayer.

Finally, it seems possible to follow such a way as this only if at times by some explicit daily prayer and by retreat we verify in action the truth of our desire to pray deeply. We will need time to look closely at the life and work of Christ, as well as at the means he used, if we are not subtly to change his message or move away from a growing integrity in the union of the words that we speak and the lives that we live. We also need reflective periods in order to contemplate other people and the area in which we work, if, in our activity, we are not to caricature them and be partial in our recognition of the facts by envisaging them as being outside Christ's revelation and our faith.