

Transcendental Prayer

Often the Christians pray without asking questions about prayer. Their prayers are daily exercises whose obligation ought to be fulfilled before the leisure to reflect upon the complex processes and elusive nature of prayer is available. One may even justify that unreflectiveness with a pragmatical statement — after all, it is more necessary to pray than to know what prayer is all about.

But if one is called to teach others how to pray, one cannot help but to get involved in quite a few problems about prayer especially with regard to its specific nature. As a matter of fact a coherent theory of prayer is of great use for those who teach prayer, particularly “prayer without ceasing” according to the precept of the Lord Jesus

Knowledge consists in answers to questions, so to understand the answers one has to know the questions. Two fundamental questions can be asked about prayer. What are people doing when they pray? Why are they doing that praying? These questions open two avenues of research on prayer; one descriptive, the other interpretative. The descriptions of prayer collect and stock up as many aspects, elements, stages of prayer as possible. The interpretations try to reach the heart of the matter and seek to get a hold of its nature, as one stalks the game or coaxes it out of its den. Descriptions content themselves with a common sense meaning of prayer, interpretations need a systematic definition

of it, which develops technical terms in some well-ordered and explanatory views.

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Every description of prayer has something of a list. To list all elements, aspects, and stages of prayer is hardly possible, because the life of prayer is extremely composite, many-faceted, and multilayered. However, some collection of data concerning prayer is a prerequisite to the interpretation of it.

The innumerable data concerning prayer that are available can be organized from different points of view. The main ones are —

1. The *operative* point of view, according to which prayer is a special activity that involves many human acts, spiritual exercises, and psychological techniques.

2. The *purposive* point of view, which considers prayer as a complex system of means aiming at the goal of union with God.

3. The *progressive* point of view, which encompasses the whole life of prayer as a long process going through successive steps, stages, and grades of development.

From the *operative* point of view prayer is made up by words, gestures, postures etc. and one differentiates among the various modes of the activity of prayer speaking of vocal and mental prayer, private and communitarian prayer, liturgical and contemplative prayer, discursive and intuitive prayer, shared and centering prayer, and so forth.

From the *purposive* point of view, one distinguishes prayer of petition from prayer of thanksgiving, prayer of propitiation from prayer of praise, prayer of intercession from prayer of adoration, etc.

From the *progressive* point of view one describes stages of ascetical and mystical prayer, of acquired and infused prayer, the prayer of beginners, of the proficient and of the perfect, prayers of quiet and prayers of conforming and transforming union, and the like.

Given the great variety and complexity of its expressions, a broad and large spectrum of definitions of prayer is possible. Many of such definitions emerged in successive periods of Christian Spirituality.

Prayer is to speak or to converse with God. Prayer is the lifting up of the mind to God. Prayer is to ask suitable things of God. Prayer is to meditate, ponder, ruminate on the mystery of God. Prayer is a silent gaze of love at God. Prayer is a posture of trustful expectation before God. Prayer is to deal many times in solitude with God who loves us . . . All these and many other definitions of prayer have been used to interpret the complexity of the life of prayer.

Can the numerous and manifold fragments of truth about prayer stressed by all those definitions be brought under some common denominator? Have such a rich variety of forms of prayer a specific core or universal nature which gives all of them an essential unity and inner connection? Is there a sort of super-definition of prayer which can merge all other definitions into one intelligible whole?

Being the principle of unity and intelligibility of the whole life of prayer such a super-definition must be —

1. Innermost to all possible expressions of true prayer,
2. Transcendental, i.e. capable of transcending all particular or categorial forms of prayer,
3. Essential, that is, belonging to the very nature of prayer and not to any of the numerous accidental aspects of it.

In other words, because the essential core or nature of prayer focused by such super-definition cannot be limited to any act, aim, and stage of the life of prayer, it must transcend all of them. But, on the other hand, being innermost to all of them insofar as they belong to the life of prayer it must describe the proper overall attitude which renders a Christian prayerful encompassing all the acts, aims, stages of his life of prayer.

At this point several clarifications about human acts and spiritual attitudes are necessary.

Two fundamental levels or layers can be distinguished in the spiritual life of the human person —

1. The layer of the *human acts*, which are the constitutive elements of the deliberate and responsible activity of the person. They attain specific objects, by which they are essentially determined, and may spring from habits, which are their inner effective source.

2. The layer of *spiritual attitudes*, which lies in the human person at a deeper level than his acts and habits, and do not reach specific objects, as the human acts and habits do, but point instead to, or better still towards ultimate goals which lie beyond actual attainment. Such attitudes are constituted by particular intertwinings occurring at the roots of the habits in the depths of the human spirit. They are ongoing orientations or personal modes of being involved with ultimate goals. Accordingly, the words used to define those attitudes are more pointers of the particular orientation assumed by the person during those attitudes than expressions of concepts able to grasp its specific content.

If we now apply the distinction between acts and attitudes to the life of prayer, we realize that the human acts of prayer can be traced back to the virtue of religion, as they are an important part of the worship of God; whereas the attitude transcends the virtue of religion and is a response of the whole human person to the mystery of God.

Thus the term prayer admits quite different meanings. In a universal sense prayer is a blanket-word that covers the entire life of prayer. In a categorial sense prayer means particularly the acts of the life of prayer. In a transcendental sense prayer means the fundamental attitude and orientation of the prayerful person. The last meaning of prayer can fittingly be also expressed by the word "prayerfulness". Therefore prayerfulness refers to the dynamic core of the life of prayer, to the innermost and overall pure essence of prayer; while, on the other hand, the entire life of prayer is nothing else than the embodiment in words and gestures, in thoughts and feelings of that prayerfulness. At any rate, the mere term of prayerfulness although very significant, is hardly more than a label placed on

the inner core of the life of prayer and does not say what that core really is.

Trying to look into the spiritual content of prayerfulness one must bear in mind that the entire life of prayer is a response of the whole human person to God. That is why prayerfulness can imaginatively be described as the human tuning in and staying on God's wave-length, or as the prolonged exposure of the human spirit as if it were a mirror to the light and warmth of the divine Sun.

In more appropriate terms the spiritual content of prayerfulness is defined as "a loving awareness of God's presence." That definition is appropriate because it explicates that the human person responds to God in prayer (a) acknowledging the mysterious reality of God or becoming aware of God's presence to him (b) and lovingly responding to God's constant caring love for him. The human being responds fully as a person when he reaches out to other people by his intellect and will. So the awareness and love of his spiritual faculties are like arms used by the praying person to reach out, embrace, and establish an interpersonal relationship with God.

Some further clarifications are needed here.

Knowledge and affection occur at different levels of the human psyche. And, on the other hand, the loving awareness is meant to define the attitude of prayerfulness and not the act of prayer. Let us explain, therefore, at what layer of the human spirit is the attitude of prayerfulness situated precisely as a loving awareness of the presence on God.

I. Awareness belongs to the broad realm of consciousness, viz. to the cognitive response of the person to a perceived object. Such broad cognitive experience involves at least two different layers or states of consciousness —

a. The state of *actual attention* or "attentiveness", which the human intellect turned towards the outer world directly pays to a particular object of knowledge on which it is focussed.

* Cf. F. Giardini, O.P., *Loving Awareness of God's Presence in Prayer*, Alba House, Staten Island, N.Y., 1978.

b. The state of being *virtually or habitually aware* or "awareness", which the human intellect turned towards the inner world reflexively cultivates towards some ultimate goal.

Undoubtedly, consciousness, attentiveness, and awareness can be considered synonyms when one wants to lay emphasis on the similarity of the cognitive experience that all of them equally involve. But we differentiate them from one another because we want to emphasize their particular modes of knowing. We will better explain that differentiation with a simile.

Overall human consciousness is like a big iceberg. The tip of it, that emerges above the surface of the ocean and can actually be seen, is the attention or attentiveness of the human spirit. The hulking part of it, that lies hidden below the surface of the ocean, is the awareness of the human spirit. It is clear, accordingly, that attentiveness and awareness are a portion of the same block of human consciousness, and that awareness is subliminal with respect to actual attention, as if it were situated at the threshold of it. The very fact that one can emphatically speak of attentive awareness bears evidence that awareness without qualifications can be non-attentive, that is, not focusing on a particular object. So non-attentive awareness is a non-conceptual, unobjectified, inarticulated type of consciousness. The attitude of prayerfulness involves such a diffuse awareness of the presence of God.

II. Something analogous to the special consciousness of God which we have termed awareness happens in the will and affection of the prayerful person, whose awareness of God is precisely qualified "loving". In fact also in the realm of affection, that as far as the life of prayer is concerned is properly termed "fervor of the spirit", one can distinguish two states —

a. The state of *devotion*; an act both of the inner sensitivity and of the will, by which the prayerful person expresses his willingness of self-surrender to God at the discursive level of his spirit and feels in doing so a consolation of his heart.

b. The state of *holy desire*; a radical yearning of the prayerful person that wells up from the depths of his will and sensitivity and orientates him towards the unattained goodness of God in Himself. Such holy desire works in the prayerful person as a spiritual compass in-built in the depths of his spirit, showing him

at all times the direction of and impacting into him a powerful attraction towards God's infinite goodness.

Thus, as devotion is in the prayerful person a special affective act that follows the correlative cognitive act of attention, so holy desire is an affective orientation that accompanies the diffuse awareness of God, which is typical of the prayerful person. In fact it is such holy desire which renders the awareness of the prayerful person actually "loving".

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The foregoing analyses of the various states of consciousness and of fervor of the spirit not only have manifested the basic component elements of prayerfulness but have also clarified that such core attitude of the life of prayer belongs more, as it were, to the field of being than to the field of acting. As a matter of fact, the loving awareness of prayerfulness is not an act or a set of acts of the person at prayer but the constantly being aware of and in love with God that characterizes the prayerful person. We want to stress the fact that it is not a particular act of devotion, but the permanent thrust of holy desire; it is not actual attention to God cultivated during the exercises of prayer, but the diffuse state of awareness of God's presence, which permeates the whole life of the prayerful person. And precisely because the loving awareness of the prayerful person is a diffuse attitude and a constant orientation at the depths of his spirit it does not attain God with any satisfactory specific act of knowledge and love. It is rather the experience that one cannot comprehend Him and must always yearn for Him as the most beloved one who is unattainable. However that same God who can be described as "absent", because unattained satisfactorily by holy desire, and 'unknown', because not comprehended by prayerful awareness, is paradoxically dwelling in the depths of the prayerful person, whence His mysterious presence wells up uninterruptedly as a stream of living water. Indeed, the awareness involved in prayerfulness is an obscure but intensive sense of God's mysterious presence, and the holy desire that accompanies it is a constant grateful yearning for God who loved us first. That is why, although the awareness and holy desire of prayerfulness are not clear and distinct acts of knowledge and love, the knowledge and love that they afford are not less than the knowledge and love involved in the acts of

attention and devotion. On the contrary, the obscure sense of God's presence with which awareness infuses the prayerful person, and the yearning response of gratitude that holy desire impresses on him are very special modes of *supra-attention* to and *supra-devotion* for the infinite Truth and Goodness of God in Himself, that transcend all acts of specific attention and devotion in the exercises of prayer. Such being in a constant and all-pervading state of knowledge and love of God is not achieved through the effort of the human person, but it is granted by God through the infusion of the theological virtues, which communicate to the prayerful Christian their divine power of Knowledge (i.e. the awareness of faith) and of love (i.e. the holy desire of hope and charity).

In other words and by way of conclusion, the essential core of the life of prayer that we have termed "prayerfulness" or "transcendental prayer" is a constant response of the Christian to the mystery of God by virtue of the habits of faith, hope, and charity. And that is the living seed of Christian contemplation which grows and bears fruit in more prayerfulness according to the increase of the hold that the theological virtues get of the life of the Christian.

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The ultimate goal, which is the terminating point of the attitude and orientation of loving awareness, was earlier described as God's presence. Some clarifications about this very special presence are to be added now.

To be present means not just to be close, but, and even more, to be understanding of and caring for someone. Hence, whereas things can be near or far, only persons are properly present or absent. Because only persons are able to know and love, to show understanding and care for others, and so to be truly present to them.

Where to- be-present is attributed to God as the ultimate goal of the loving awareness which constitutes prayerfulness, such qualification obviously does not concern God in Himself but God in relation to the prayerful person. Now, we explained above that the Christian is made prayerful by the infusion of the virtues of faith, hope and charity. Consequently God is said to be present insofar as He offers Himself as the terminal point of the dynamic

orientation that the habits of faith, hope, and charity impress on the prayerful Christian. And it needs to be stressed that the three theological virtues have to be all together in the prayerful person to make God fully present to him.

Actually, if the theological virtue of faith is separated from hope and charity it does not provide the Christian faithful with more than the conviction of God's existence; the existence of a Supreme Being up-there, real but faraway, as a distant star of the spiritual universe. The theological virtue of hope adds all-mighty providence to that distant God. However, where hope is separated from charity it does not render God intimately present to the Christian. Only the theological virtue of charity, being a supernatural friendship with God, has the power of rendering God intimately present to the prayerful Christian.

But, to understand correctly the significance of such intimate presence of God one must bear in mind that God plays here the role not of an attained object but of the yearned for ultimate goal of the loving awareness (viz. of the habits of faith, hope, and charity) of the prayerful Christian. In fact, on the one hand, being a certain friendship of the Christian with God, charity, as it were, draws God close to the prayerful person, and in this sense makes God intimately present to him. On the other hand, though, charity is the most perfect response of love that the Christian gives to the infinite goodness of God in Himself; and in this sense charity pulls the Christian beyond whatever he experiences of God's goodness and plunges him into the infinite goodness of God in Himself. This is why charity provokes in the prayerful person an intensive yearning for the unattainable (or "absent") goodness of God.

Consequently the self-same charity instills into the prayerful Christian a deep sense both of the presence and of the absence of God. Because of his charity the prayerful Christian is forcefully driven to yearn for a paradoxical God's presence-in-absence. The growing experience of this consoling and anguishing divine presence-in-absence characterizes the progressive entering of the prayerful Christian into mystical life.

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