

PART THREE

The Daily Life of the Christian

THE APOSTOLATE OF PRAYER

Do we Christians really believe in the power of prayer? Believe, that is, in its power on this earth and not merely in some distant heavenly dwelling-place of God? Is our thinking still sufficiently ‘anthropomorphic’ to make us dare to believe that we can by our bawling and weeping move the heart of God to intervene in this world? Or has our thinking become so abstract, so spiritless, that we will allow to prayer no other value than that of a ‘tranquilizer’, or recognize it as no more than an affirmation of our hope for a success beyond this life?

Yes, the prayer of petition is quite a problem. Its practice is now almost exclusively confined to ordinary people. It is found only where a ‘primitive religiosity’ holds sway, which – in the opinion of the more sophisticated – has not quite grasped the fact that we cannot ask anything of God, since he is in the ultimate analysis an inexorable Fate. These others, the clever ones, who do not form part of this folk with rosaries, pilgrimages, processions, and so on, become ‘primitive’ only when they have their backs to the wall. Then they will pray (species A); or, if they cannot bring themselves to do it even then (species B), they give way (quite rightly and quite logically) to despair. Should they unexpectedly get away with it (their life, their money, their health, and so on), then they will again give up praying (species A), or give themselves over to Existentialistic nihilism (species B). It is therefore from a Christian point of view quite right and just that, in the judgements of history, the ‘sophisticated’, the ‘intellectuals’, should have more prospect of making bitter acquaintance with the (allegedly) inexorable march of events than the little people who do not think it entirely superfluous and unintellectual to pray for their daily bread and other such earthly needs.

But seriously: do we or do we not believe in the flesh of the eternal Word of God? If so, then the true God must be capable of very human [210] feelings, and the earth with all that happens on it cannot be quite so unimportant to him. It is true that events here below may not always proceed very smoothly and peaceably (after all, that God did die on the Cross), but what goes on among us cannot be utterly unimportant. And if it is true that God is the Lord of the world, and that he has taught us the ‘Our Father’ with its petition for our daily bread and deliverance from evil, we must clearly assume that the prayer of petition addressed to this anthropomorphic and mighty God is a real power in this world. And here we can safely leave to one side all that the theologians have elaborated about the compatibility of the prayer of petition with the sovereignty of God, his absolute freedom and his changelessness. Even if one did not think or suspect that the theologians in these speculations were thinking a little too much in terms of the time ‘Before Christ’ and were not quite aware of the fact – naturally only in this particular speculation – that the Word of God became flesh, and that therefore he through whom everything comes into being has become very approachable and easily moved, this in any case is true and certain: there is a prayer of petition which speaks to God and is not a mere exorcism of one’s own heart, but boldly and explicitly ventures to ask him for bread, peace, restraint of his enemies, health, the spread of his Kingdom on earth, and a host of such earthly and highly problematic things. That such prayer combines a great measure of ‘self-

will' (for one presents to Him one's *own* desires) with a supreme degree of submissiveness (for one *prays* to Him whom one cannot compel, persuade or charm, but only beg), that here there is a mingling and an incomprehensible fusion of the greatest boldness with the deepest humility, of life with death, this makes the prayer of petition in one respect not the lowest but the highest, the most divinely human form of prayer. Why else is the Lord's Prayer not a hymn but a sevenfold petition? There should be more stubborn and humble, more insistent and urgent supplication among Christians; supplication even for those things which appear to *us*, shortsighted though we be, of importance, even for that realization of God's Kingdom, such as we are necessarily led to imagine it. For, the prayer of petition, robust and straightforward, is a power in the world and in its history, in heaven and on earth.

Ultimately even the unbeliever would have to concede this, although theoretically he will deny it. For in practice he admits it. Let us imagine, for example, that a tyrant knew that all his subjects without exception intended to fall on their knees and beg God to free them from his tyranny, [211] and that they had solemnly assured the tyrant they would do nothing more to this end than pray. Would he for all that allow them to do it? He would try to prevent it. It is true he does not believe in the power of the Being to whom the prayer is addressed, but he believes in the power of the prayer, although this prayer itself only has power if there is faith in the power of the Being addressed.

On this point one could introduce a kind of transcendental deduction of the truth of prayer. That prayer exists is a fact. It is an unavoidable fact. It is efficacious. It is only efficacious where there is faith in the power of the Being to whom it is addressed and not merely in the power of prayer. Can there be a phenomenon which rests in principle (and not just in individual cases) on an illusion, while at the same time it is real and efficacious? No, for such a proposition negates itself, because (among other reasons) it could also be applied to the affirmation of this proposition itself. For every proposition presupposes that the attainment of a truth in a phenomenon of knowledge is not from the beginning an illusion. Everyone who admits this, and everyone must admit it, cannot justify either logically or existentially the fundamental and universal denial of that which is the condition of the efficacy of prayer, namely faith in the power (and therefore in the reality) of the Being to whom the prayer is directed.

And now, let us imagine for a moment that Christians were convinced of the need for prayer, no longer in a general and notional way, but in a really concrete and practical way, so that their conviction took on flesh and blood, as It were, and issued in action. Let us imagine they were convinced that this prayer must be at once very heavenly and very earthly, that is, it must understand the needs of earth in a very heavenly way, precisely *in so far* as in them the Kingdom of God is to be realized: and it must be understood, the Kingdom of God in a very earthly way, in so far as it means here and now the Church in our time, conversion, moral discipline, reverence for the name of God and of Christ in public life, active Christianity, and so on. Let us suppose for a moment that the Christians of today, those interested in their religion, in particular the more educated among them, were not merely to talk about the Mystical Body of Christ and discuss its theology but were to live this truth; that is to say, suppose it were actually to be borne in upon them with fear and trembling that we have to bear one another's burdens and that all of us are accountable before the judgement seat of God for the eternal destiny of one another. Let us multiply these delightful hypotheses and these blessed [212] dreams (one more or less hardly matters): suppose everyone were convinced, because he is very humble and therefore very realistic, that such attitudes cannot be allowed to remain only a distant ideal, permitting us to enjoy a spiritual pleasure at our best moments when we delight to feast upon our own sublime thoughts, but that they have to be put into practice, that they must be taken up anew each day, and that we have to allow ourselves to be reminded by *others* that we have need of certain gestures, certain usages,

certain actions, in which these attitudes are already preformed and embodied; for they cannot be expected to well up out of the depths of the heart every day with power so fresh as to eliminate the need for such pre-formed and pre-established practices. Further, suppose everyone were convinced that prayer has to penetrate the whole of life, that we must pray at all times, that is to say that our will interceding with God in Christ for the welfare of all has to be a formative power in our daily life, that the prayer of the member of Christ interceding for the whole Church has to be transformed into a penitential life, into patience, love, fasting, alms-giving and into a courageous and joyful renunciation, which is able calmly to pass by many an 'enjoyment' and pleasure of life. Further still: suppose everyone were convinced that those who wield ecclesiastical authority are not just the supervisors of an immense apparatus, of an ecclesiastical bureaucratic administration, but the fathers of our souls, whose words direct us in a manner at once paternal and fraternal even in matters beyond obligation.

If all this were to become true, and it would be wonderful if it were to become true, what would happen? Many things, naturally. But here we have only to follow out the consequences in a particular direction. And these look like this: Christians would pray for the whole Church, that God might give her peace, might unite her and preserve her, might protect her against all the powers and forces of darkness, might make it possible for her children to glorify God in a peace such as the world cannot give. They would pray for the Pope, the bishops and priests (oh, they have such need of it), for all seekers after truth, for the whole of separated and divided Christendom, for Jews and Gentiles, for the poor and the sick, for refugees and prisoners. They would pray every day. They would understand their whole lives as being related to the bearing of others' burdens and to the care of those souls for whose actions and ultimate destiny they will one day have to render account. They would, in every pain of body and distress of heart and mind, declare like the Apostle with serene courage: [213] 'I help to pay off the debt which the afflictions of Christ leave still to be paid, for the sake of his body, the Church' (Col 1:24). They would no longer be content to pray in a merely general way for the Kingdom of God and its coming. Their heart would be as large as the world, and would yet be mindful of the most minute details affecting humanity and the Church in the drama of salvation between light and darkness: the refugees in Korea, the priests of God in the prisons and camps behind the Iron Curtain, the importance of the cinema for the education and the corruption of the masses, the frequented and the deserted paths of Christian charitable relief the silent despair of the lonely, who have lost God and man, and thousand upon thousand of other such things. They would gladly suffer themselves to be reminded by others of this or that intention. They would take up with a heart filled with self-forgetting love 'intentions' proposed for their prayers like the '*Oremus, dilectissimi nobis, pro . . .*' of the priest in the Bidding Prayers of the Good Friday Liturgy.

Such prayer would generate a power sufficient to transform their lives: their piety would become less egoistic and introverted. They would no longer be resentful if they themselves have to drink of that chalice of bitterness out of which all must drink the redemption of their being. They would then spontaneously begin also to *do* their part for God and his Kingdom; by witnessing to their faith, by helping their neighbour (one must first have sought him with the heart, that is in prayer, and then one's feet will also find him) and those far distant (in the missions) and so on. They would gradually begin to feel something of that exquisite impulse of love to consume itself in service and obedience for others, until it has entirely spent and emptied itself. And perhaps they would go on from this to acquire some understanding of the heart of the Lord, of the mystery of that love which wells up out of the impenetrable depths – out of what is called the heart – of him who is the Word of God in the flesh: inexhaustible, judging and redeeming, pouring itself out in fruitless generosity and so drawing everything gloriously to itself. They would then (still more slowly, almost timidly and humbly) dare to hope that something of the love of this heart, which moves the sun and the other stars

throughout the universe, might seize and transform the meditations and aspirations of their own heart, which, alas, is of itself only inclined to evil; they would perhaps at the dawn of each day with recollected heart dedicate themselves, their life and the newly-given day to this love (or at least attempt to do so; [214] for the thing is of course not accomplished with the mere formula of such a dedication).

Would it not be good if there were many more such Christians to continue this apostolate of intercession, who at every hour of the eternal Good Friday of this world (since the Son of God is crucified continually in all his members, and together with him both those who say ‘remember me . . .’ and those who fail to utter this word) hear to some degree the rousing call ‘*Oremus*’, bend the knee and pray for all the estates of the Church and all her needs, and who, when they hear the ‘*Levate*’, go forth into life with a heart which has been filled with prayer of this kind?

Such an ‘exercise’ (particularly in its concrete form) would not by any means be the sole and exclusive method of procuring a happy spiritual life. For there are many paths into the Kingdom of Heaven. And in the house of the Father there are many mansions. But – and this is equally certain, although often forgotten – there is only as much true Christianity as there is dwelling in the heart love for God *and* for men in Christ Jesus and in the Church. And prayer is still more important than the Sacraments. For many a soul has been saved without Sacraments, but never without prayer. And the grace of God can never be merited, neither in its beginning nor in its end. But if it gratuitously precedes our action, then the first reaction it arouses is that movement of the heart which can be described most simply and accurately as ‘prayer’.

But if prayer is that act in which man gives himself wholly to God, and if man is a being who can only exist by reaching out towards a You (or be condemned to be shut in himself), and if the invisible God becomes a You only where and in so far as one loves the You whom one sees, then prayer can only be true prayer where it is open and ready to embrace the other within that movement in which the whole person gives himself to God, that is where it is a prayer inspired by care for souls. (It is therefore quite all right if people learn to pray through each other: the mother through care for her child, and so on. And many a person has prayed, thank God, without knowing it, because his heart trembled with the anxiety of true love for another and he sent into the silent infinitude of God a general SOS which was only apparently undirected.)

Such prayer, then, which enfolds all others with oneself in the one community of sin and salvation, is a proceeding which is absolutely essential to Christianity. Consciously to see this happening and deliberately and expressly to foster it must therefore signify the accomplishment of an [215] ‘essential Christianity’. And this is sufficient to understand the dignity of such apostolic prayer, without going so far as to assert that every practice of Christianity must begin at this point (to arrive at it is certainly indispensable).

Would it not be good if there were such Christians? Ought there not to be such Christians? Can we not expect there to be *such* Christians because – by the mysterious grace of God – in spite of every human indolence and stubborn resistance there are still *Christians* and ultimately Christians must be *such* Christians? There are such. That is a comfort. There exists such a mission (that is what ‘Apostleship’ means) to a prayer of ceaseless supplication for the Church and it is accepted and carried out. But this mission can be accepted by a greater number and carried out in a more faithful way. And this is what the ‘Apostleship of Prayer’ wants to help to bring about.

This is not the place to describe at great length the establishment of the ‘Apostleship of Prayer’; its foundation in the year 1844; its development, its statutes and papal recommendations; its history, which even in Germany is not without honour, beginning with a prophetic paper by the great Görres in his old age as early as 1844; its present extent; its

literature and periodicals ('Messengers') which, seventy-two in number in forty-five languages, have (it is still worth mentioning) a total annual printing throughout the world of about three million copies. These are things which must be said elsewhere.

But let us be honest. This is where the difficulties and secret resistance begin, because elevated pious theory is suddenly brought down to the practical; difficulties on two sides: for in this world even a 'good' thing always gives sufficient objective cause, both culpable and inculpable, to be regarded as a bad thing. Even the best things on this earth can only repeat the cry: 'Blessed is he who does not take scandal in me!' And we for our part should not be so arrogantly convinced of the rightness of our sensibilities that we ascribe without further ado every opposition which our feelings manifest against such pious practices of Church life to a movement of the Holy Spirit.

The educated man of today experiences an odd feeling when he hears of a 'pious union of the faithful' or, even worse, if he is urged to join it, if he finds it suggested to him that he ought to consider it important for his spiritual life to figure in a list of members (in a book or card-index). Will such people gladly take to doing, by praying in the prescribed form: 'All [216] for Thee, most Sacred Heart of Jesus', what they certainly can accomplish in its essential meaning in their own way? Will they really come into living contact with the great reality intended when it is proposed to them that they should pray: 'Divine Heart of Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I offer Thee all the holy Masses . . .'? Will such a person not begin to reflect and to ask what it can possibly mean, to offer all holy Masses through the heart of Mary to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, moreover to offer them 'with the intention with which this Heart offers them to the heavenly Father on our altars'? Will he not declare then, that all this is incomprehensible to him and appears far too complicated and distorted, and that he would much rather carry on taking his part in the celebration of the Eucharist by offering through the Son and in the Son that sacrifice of praise and of reparation in which he is again made sacramentally present by the Church, who gave himself to the Father on the Cross through his death? Will he not take fright when he hears of 'promoters', 'sections', 'Children's Eucharistic Crusades', 'Leagues of the Sacred Heart' and similar things? Will his timid and slowly-growing devotion and reverence for the Blessed Virgin and Mother of God not be subject to too great a strain, when it is called upon 'to take refuge in the Immaculate Maternal Heart of the Blessed Virgin'?

One can experience these and similar hesitations even in reading the official documents of the Apostleship of Prayer with all due respect. There is no sense in denying this. But they are not ultimately decisive. And therefore it is sufficient to have mentioned them. For they can all be sidestepped without attempting to discuss them in detail by answering the simple question: what does the Apostleship of Prayer as an organization (and not merely as a Christian disposition and way of life) in fact demand of anyone joining it? Initially and precisely only two things: the one very external and the other very central. The external: one has to be inscribed in the register of members. Naturally this is not the decisive element, for *ultimately* what is important is the prayer and those who pray, not their statistics. (Nevertheless, the statistics of the Apostleship of Prayer in the whole world comprise the names of thirty-five million persons.) And no-one should allow himself to be registered who is not honestly trying to make a reality in his life of the spirit and activity of the Apostleship of Prayer. Otherwise all lists are useless. But can the act of registration have any meaning at all? Certainly, for it is an act of witness. It is the embodiment of an inner yes, which is at the same time expression and strength of [217] this Yes. Love and reverence can glimpse in such a list much more than the concern of a bureaucratic administration which by a dreadful chemistry contrives everywhere to transform even the promptings of the spirit and the movements of the heart into regulations, lists and statistics. It can be regarded as a small part of that humble form of the servant, in which the grace of God and its working in the interior of man are made

manifest externally and without which interior Christianity is only half-grown.

And then the interior thing: that one should begin the day by fixing one's heart and mind in that disposition which considers one's own life even in its most profane daily routine to be dedicated in Christ to the glory of God and to one's neighbour with whom we are joined for our common salvation in the Body of Christ which is the Church. (Whoever has tried this will know that it must be done verbally – which does not mean by means of a fixed formula – if the spirit is not to evaporate very soon.) *How* this fixing of one's intention in prayer is carried out in the individual case is not prescribed in any binding way in the Apostleship of Prayer. But whoever makes a habit of this daily re-orientation, whoever admits to himself with clear-headed courage that honest intention and changing moods do not coincide, that those free acts of the heart which must spring from the inmost kernel of one's being must yet be achieved and cultivated in daily faithful effort and repeatedly wrested from the soil, will gratefully and humbly allow himself to be reminded by others of his vocation to the responsibility of prayer; he will allow the Church to call out to him unceasingly the cue for new prayer, for example by means of the so-called 'monthly intentions' approved by the Pope for the Apostleship of Prayer. This is after all only a continuation of what is written of the first Pope and the Church of his time: 'The Church sent up prayers without ceasing for him to God' (Ac 12:5).

Whoever strives to form his spiritual life in this way and guide it in this direction, will also know that such a dedication of his day and of his life, if it is truly to be a work of grace and not of our own mood, has its beginning and its end in the sacrifice of the Son for the salvation of the world. He will take part in the offering of this one sacrifice by the Church as commissioned by Christ, as often as he has the opportunity, and he will receive the body of the Lord through which we are all one body, we who eat of this bread (1 Co 10:17). And as soon as he has discovered that the rosary can be the mystical prayer of daily life, as simple as it is sublime, and when his spiritual life has become wide and strong enough to [218] realize spiritually what is dogmatically evident, namely that the blessed Virgin has objectively for the individual a meaning corresponding to her unique role in the history of salvation, then he will gladly pray daily – as and when he has the opportunity – a part of the rosary as a small contribution to carrying out his vocation of prayer for the salvation of the whole world. (Naturally the development may be in the opposite direction: through the action, namely the praying of the rosary, one acquires the spirit which should animate this action.) If he takes the trouble thus to take part as often as possible in the celebration of the sacrifice of our altar, if he honours the blessed Virgin, then not only has he done the most necessary part (the daily attitude of prayer, the 'offering up'), but he has done everything which the Apostleship of Prayer demands of him immediately as a 'work'. For everything else is left by the Apostleship of Prayer to the still growth in grace of the soul itself. It is sufficient for it that one has made a beginning which is tangible, which can be planned, which can be 'resolved', which can be repeatedly renewed. But this kind of plan carried out with daily faithfulness is one of those little things which are seemingly nothing, but on which everything depends and from which the greatest consequences can flow.

The Apostleship of Prayer has of its essence a 'strong' and a 'weak' side. It is in its spirit and goal so essential and necessarily already bound up with every really Christian life that it might for that very reason appear superfluous as a separate organization. But this is precisely its justification. It aims at being a help, in itself very simple, to the practice of the essential attitudes of a genuine Christianity. Such help is always necessary. For we, are always Christians in the *community* of Christ. And therefore even the most personal and internal things have a social character from which they receive their support and encouragement. Such help is particularly necessary today. For man is today more than ever the product of his environment – even in religious matters. And when was prayer for the Church and the Kingdom of God ever more necessary than now, when, in the one history of the world which

no longer permits any individual peoples to live out their own history independently, each one really and in the most evident way bears the burdens of others and each one can be affected by the salvation and the damnation of all?

If the one Holy Spirit is to move us all, and there is one body because we have been baptized by this Spirit into one body (1 Co 12:13) and if we must therefore – because we are members of the one body of Christ – [219] with one mind bear each other's anxieties, then everyone ought to pray for everyone else. Apostolic prayer is a Christian duty. That is why the Apostle says: 'Be watchful in prayer for all the Saints' (Ep 6:18). 'Only, brethren, I entreat you by our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the love of the Holy Spirit, to give me the help of your prayers to God on my behalf' (Rm 15:30). So the 'Church Militant' can continually admonish her children, as St Paul did: 'Pray for us too; that God may grant an opening for our preaching the mystery of Christ' (Col 4:3); 'Dear brothers, pray for us' (1 Th 5:25) ' . . . that the word of the Lord may run its course triumphantly' (2 Th 3:1).

Faced with the immeasurable vastness of the undertaking and the desperate minuteness (even incapacity) of human possibilities, the pastors of the Church must continually admonish the faithful in like manner. They, and indeed all those who possess the royal priesthood of all the faithful, should have ever before their eyes the example of St Paul's apostolic prayer (cf. e.g. Rm 1:10; 2 Co 13:7, 9; Ep 1:16 *sqq.*; 3:14 *sqq.*; Ph 1:9; Col 1:9-12; 1 Th 3:10-13; 2 Th 1:11; Heb 13:12 *sq.*). If the Church is beginning only now for the first time in the unified history of the world to become even in evident appearance the one World Church; if by that fact she is faced with quite new tasks and is forced (slowly, but for the short span of man's life very fast) to adapt herself to quite new and unaccustomed circumstances and duties and this in a situation beset by direst dangers both from within and without, then prayer has become for the Church, for the coming of the Kingdom, doubly necessary.

At a time when the first Christian community was forced to cry out: 'What a tumult among the nations, what useless murmuring among peoples. They arise, the kings of the earth, princes plot against the Lord and his Anointed', she had the courage to pray: 'See, Lord, how they threaten! Grant then to your servants to preach your word with all openness.' And in case it might be thought she did not have the courage to utter a prayer of a very 'this-worldly' character, she continued: 'Stretch out your hand, that in the name of Jesus, your holy servant, healings, signs and wonders may be performed' (Ac 4:25-31). 'Signs and wonders' could happen today too, if we would but realize and fulfil the 'Apostolate of Prayer' for the whole Church of God.