

The Possibilities of Prayer

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Prayer is multi-faceted

The prayer needed for living in a postmodern world must be as authentic and realistic as the world, itself. It should not lead us away from the world, but engage us more fully in the lives and issues present in society. Just as the world is perceived as both material and spiritual, so the single life of prayer is experienced as *action* and *contemplation*. Dynamic prayer collaborates with God in the on-going creation of the world through a union of desires. It is the *mystery* of God's life in us working through us in the midst of goodness and evil. Prayer is alive when it becomes an expression of the tension between "the way things are" and "the way things could become." The distance between these two realities is the venue for life. The substance of prayer is to be *fully alive*. A person of prayer is a person who is "in God" and in the world at the same time.

How can we be "in God?" How do we share God's enthusiasm for life? How does our life *become* prayer? There is no single prescription because "We do not pray as generic human beings."¹ Each person has a unique way of expressing God's presence, responding to God's desires, and collaborating with God. We are complex and varied creatures and experience God

¹ From a talk by Gero McLoughlin, S.J. at a staff retreat for the Episcopal Diocese of Arizona, January 1992.

in a multi-dimensional cosmos. This is why there is such a variety of religious experiences. No single approach or combination of practices can fulfill the needs of every person's life of prayer. There are many ways to wisdom and the contemplation of God.

Wonder is the gateway to prayer

All of us, regardless of culture or homeland, have experienced moments when, without words or thought patterns, we are lifted beyond ourselves. These were moments when we just "knew" that we are linked with "something;" that we are not alone. These moments continue throughout our lives, but far too often the busyness, noise, and technological demeanor of our adult lives stifle our openness to wonder. As adults, we take too much for granted. We tend to be suspicious of or embarrassed by experiences we cannot "explain." In our postmodern world we shy away from anything that might move us "at the gut level." In the wake of our over dependence on what is practical and will bring "results" we need to renew our *trust* in childlike wonder and reclaim the wisdom we experience in the wordless dimension of life that leads us beyond ourselves. St. John Chrysostom an influential preacher, theologian, and bishop of the early Church reminds us how God's presence in creation takes us *beyond* our human understanding of the Divine. "We wonder at the open sea and its limitless depths; but we wonder fearfully when we stoop down and see how deep it (actually) is. It was in this way that the (psalmist) stooped and looked at the limitless and yawning sea of God's wisdom. And he

was struck with shuddering.”² Our feeble attempts to define the ineffable are eclipsed by the wonder of God’s presence in creation.

Wonder can lead us to prayer because “True prayer is response to God’s love.”³ Moments of wonder are natural responses to God’s presence in creation. Our response to beauty or mystery is not a capricious or untrustworthy emotion. The emotions which often accompany wonder are not ends in themselves, but link us to God. In our moments of awe-filled seeing we, too, are *seen*. Wonder enables us to see *within* and *beyond* what we actually observe or experience. We are changed by the encounter. Wonder is a reciprocal experience; it is alive. I *see* something, but at the same time I see someone, some *presence* in what I see. That presence evokes a response within me and I experience *communion* with what I see. I am changed by a *mutual seeing*. This mutual seeing connects me with what I am experiencing (I am not just an observer!) and I receive a blessing, a moment of grace. There is an awareness of unity, a

² Paul W. Harkins, trans. *St. John Chrysostom On the Incomprehensible Nature of God*, vol. 72 of *The Fathers of the Church*. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1984, Homily I, 24, page 60. I found this reference in Beldon C. Lane. *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) It is a “must read” for anyone interested in the relationship between the human’s soul’s longing for God and wilderness landscapes.

³ Mark Gibbard. *Hidden Springs*. London: SCM Press, 1979, Preface.

bonding in love. I *experience life*, without judgment or analysis.

“The world is charged with the grandeur of
God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook
foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
crushed.”⁴

Wonder is the threshold to prayer. It opens us to God’s presence. Yet so often we withhold credulity. We are reluctant to trust the experience, preferring to control it with our personal analysis. It is easier to say “It’s just me.” rather than trust its transpersonal dimension. This reluctance is normal, an early stage in prayer. “It takes time to become sure of this. Then gradually our response takes on what I can only call a contemplative dimension. And indisputably it can bring new vigor and love into our lives.”⁵

The possibilities of prayer

What can prayer do? Responses to this question must be open-ended because experience of God has no limits and transcends words. As we have seen, prayer is both words and action. To speak is to act. To act is to bear witness to the presence of the Word of God within us. The words of prayer constitute action and have consequences. Just as rain and snow water the earth “...so shall my

⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins. *Selected Poems*. Edited by Peter Feeney. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, page 15.

⁵ Gibbard, op. cit., Preface.

word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”⁶ Our words in prayer take their power from the Word who said, “Let there be light;” ‘and there was light.’”⁷ The Holy One is the source of the possibilities of prayer.

There are three possibilities of prayer that help us understand what prayer can do. They are not definitions or prescriptions, nor are they the only possibilities for the flow of a life of prayer. Their integrity comes from the experience of two-thousand years of Christian praying in a variety of traditions and gives a portrait of what lies ahead for you and me.

The possibilities of prayer focus on our relationship with God, with our own soul, and with the world.⁸

The first possibility of prayer is *experience of God*. This enables us to have “...a certain and most real, if limited, knowledge of (God) and Eternal Life.”⁹ It provides opportunities to experience the *realities* that our Christian doctrines, symbols, and practices try to express. These experiences of God energize our lives and the life of

⁶ Isaiah 55:11.

⁷ Genesis 1:3.

⁸ I am grateful to Evelyn Underhill for these insights. See: Evelyn Underhill. “The Possibilities of Prayer,” *Theology*, Vol. XIV, No. 28, 1937, page 198

⁹ Evelyn Underhill. “The Possibilities of Prayer,” *Theology*, Vol. XIV, No. 28, 1937, page 198

the Church. They illuminate and transform what we call “ordinary life” and help us respond and cherish the sanctity of life in all its dimensions.

The second possibility of prayer is *the sanctification of our soul and personality*. In the Judeo-Christian tradition soul refers to our entire being and is not limited to the “spiritual” part of our lives. The process of sanctification is the gradual transformation from the “self” you and I create to the “true self” that we become in God. This does not mean becoming solemn, humorless, or a boring and testy “holier-than-thou” person no one likes to be around. A life of prayer will transform our deepest selves and give us a new way of seeing ourselves, other people, and the world. We remain truly ourselves with our personalities, loves, passions, colorfulness, and talents. Sanctification does not mean a holiness that separates us from the ordinary or lifts us to some higher or more worthy level than anyone else. But it will become an opportunity for ever-growing awareness and recognition of God’s presence in all things and persons. This sensitiveness and empathy redirects our “power of initiative and endurance, which every living creature has to a greater or lesser degree, *to the single purpose of God.*”¹⁰ As an instrument of God’s vitality and love in the world we *become what we pray for.*¹¹ For Christians, this is made

¹⁰ Ibid., page 199. (Author’s emphasis in italics.)

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of “becoming prayer” see Shane Claiborne and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove. *Becoming the Answer To Our Prayers: Prayer for Ordinary Radicals.*

possible by the unique presence of God in Jesus of Nazareth. “In Jesus God was seen and touched and heard.” For the earliest Christians, “To remember Jesus Christ meant not just to think about him; it meant to live as he lived, to love as he loved, and to serve as he served in very practical ways. For Christians, holiness consists then in union with the divine by actually sharing in the divine life through Jesus Christ and in the power of the Spirit.”¹² And this is just the beginning of a steady life of prayer lived day to day. Sanctification in prayer will produce enhanced physical powers of resistance to suffering and misery, additional energy, and spiritual discernment. This gradual process of sanctification is available to everyone, yet we seem to expect *so little* from prayer.

The third possibility of prayer *is a change in our relationship with the world*. This aspect of prayer is a consequence of the first two possibilities because we can only give what we have received. Our *experience of God* gives us the grace of self-forgetfulness so that we can see God- as- God-is and learn to see ourselves through God’s eyes. *Sanctification* will help us see the world through God’s eyes and truly *desire* what God desires, not because it is “required”, but motivated by genuine love. The third possibility of prayer enables our desires, thoughts, words, and actions to be

InterVarsity Press, 2009. After this chapter was written I saw a publication notice for this book.

¹² See R. Kevin Seasoltz. *God’s Gift Giving: In Christ and Through the Spirit*. New York: Continuum, 2007. Page 129.

congruent with the person we have become in God. It is the marriage of “doing” and “being.” But we accept this congruency at great risk because prayer will involve us in the world and with people in a direct and physical way. It will require the release of spiritual energy in a mysterious way that transcends words and thoughts. This energy is both our prayer and the answer to our prayer. We become a sacrament of God’s presence to other people. “We are created spirits; that is the most real thing about us. Our spirit is intended to clothe and express within the space-time world the Absolute Spirit of God, the One Reality.”¹³ This is why we can trust our intuition, a sense of sacred calling, or an inner voice. “Spirit and spirit, God and creature, are not two material bodies, of which only one can be where the other is not; but, on the contrary, as regards our own spirit, God’s Spirit ever works in closest penetration and stimulation of our own; just as, in return, we cannot find God’s Spirit simply separate from our own spirit within ourselves.”¹⁴ In prayer we are not speaking or listening to ourselves! It is genuine dialog. It is a *mutual seeing and hearing*. The Spirit beckons us to our fullest humanity for the life of the world. This is the most significant possibility of prayer!

¹³ Evelyn Underhill. “God and Spirit,” *Theology*, Vol. XXI, No. 123, 1930, page 166.

¹⁴ Baron Frederick Von Hugel. Quoted in Evelyn Underhill, “God and Spirit”, pages 160-161.