

Global Centrum: Chicago
Global Priors Council
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THE ADVENTURE OF PRAYER

Long ago on the Long March of Church Renewal, I recall being offended at Methodist and Baptist worship services where the service began in full Praise, without the office of Confession and Absolution. I think I knew all the while I protested, however, that the service was fine, but somehow, on the wrong track. When I began to take seriously the Office of the Hours, I was struck by the fact that they were doing, in principle, what I thought was off-track Sunday mornings.

In talking about "I believe" previously, I used an analogy without stating the second half of it. It comes off as temporary belief, or blind faith in some temporal given. When the Orthodox Church says, "I am a believer," they mean belief in something unique in existence.

"I believe" fundamentally means belief that the Creator is the Redeemer. There is nothing abstract in the statement that my being has a particular relationship to the Redeemer who is the Creator. In one sense, that is all you can put your hand out about. However, you do not put your hand out about the statement, "I believe that the Creator is the Redeemer." As a matter of fact, if you put it that way, you may as well not say, "I believe." For you are dealing with temporality, which is a propositional statement. "I believe" always comes in concretion.

I have said "I believe." I have said "I care." I am not sure you can ever say "I hope" -- I really do not think that exists. Hope emerges when you are in a state of "I just believe: I just care."

Buber said that all men live by faith in something. When you have faith in that beyond which there is not-- in the Mystery-- one's relationship of faith is not only qualitatively but quantitatively different. Buber is right. Calvin is very clear that, abstractly, The Creator comes to be The Redeemer, but, in terms of devotion, it is a phenomenological experience. The Redeemer is always prior to the Creator.

Interestingly enough, "I believe" has to do with the Creator who is the Redeemer. "I care" has to do with the Redeemer who is the Creator. When you look into your own experience you grasp that when you deal with Faith you deal with the Redeemer. When you deal with Love you are dealing with the Creator.

The Morning Office is the rehearsal of the great act of Redemption. Before the Redeemer, you are dropped into prayers of confession. Evening Office has to do with the Creator. Before the dynamic of the Creator, you are dropped into intercession. I thoroughly believe that no man's devotional life is complete unless he participates in the great eternal drama of redemption and the great march of creation. That is why our prayers are so crucial, and why we must be very careful! We are not a religious order, whatever we are; we are in the midst of building a religious order. When dealing with the Redeemer, you begin with prayer as Confession. It is in the midst of whosoever confesseth that sin is forgiven. In that moment, you break forth into Gratitude.

In that great moment of belief your God cares about you; he forgives you, he receives you as his own, and dresses you in garments of purity. It is your wonder about being alive that occasions your prayers of gratitude. It is in the midst of gratitude that you grasp the deep fragility of your life. In your belief, you say, "Help thou my unbelief." You are aware that something other than yourself "believed you." (No religion in this.) Even then, "Help thou my unbelief." In the rehearsal of your weakness through the dynamics of prayer comes incredible sympathy for your brothers. And then you flow into intercessory prayer.

Now and then I find myself not liking our prayers in the morning during Daily Office. I am aware that the prayers there are not like prayers in the evening and ought not to be. In evening prayers, you are standing before the great Creator who is Redeemer. In the morning you back into prayers. It is not quite from that perspective. Backing in, however, is the only way to stand before what you believe, then care. It is the All-in-All you care for. Everyman cares. Everyman loves. But when you love the All-in-All, there is not only a quantitative difference but a

qualitative difference in your love. Now this is what is meant by Universal Benevolence. You start with intercessory prayer.

I am always frightened by how easy it is to unconsciously slip into petitionary prayer. That has haunted me. You get a little concerned, outside your shriveled up little self, about your neighbor and about the world; but that experience of being weakness itself so invisibly eats you up that you slip into petitionary prayer about your own weakness, almost forgetting that you started out praying for your neighbor. But, this is the way it is and the way it should be.

Now, how do you describe the moment of the prayer of Gratitude? This experience of weakness is different from the experience of weakness coming from the other direction. The experience of gratitude is different. It is the light. In the first, you are bowed in confession. Your life is received, and it almost explodes into "glory halleluia!" In the other, you are at the bottom, and there is a quietness. Oh, what wonder in grasping yourself on a strange, incomprehensible journey, utterly undeserving of this unique opportunity of being born and having a chance to die.

As you plumb the depths of that-- the first line in the prayer of confession is "Godly sorrow." It is the experience of grasping yourself not as individual, in one sense, although solitariness is intensified to the point of exploding beyond itself. You are overwhelmed with the sense of scandal that you ever spent one precious fragment of a second in rebellion or in misuse of this unbelievable.

In the eventide, I like to think you should center on intercession and let the Holy Spirit lead you as it will. However, I believe I am one up on the Holy Spirit. I have trapped him. It would not surprise me at all if he led you into an awareness of unfathomable weakness, indescribable gratitude, and here is the sense of the scandal of God Himself.

In intercessory prayer it is crucial to let the Holy Spirit have his way. You can disagree with this if you like, but in the morning it is ridiculous not to get down on your knees if you can: to stay there feeling like everyone is looking at you until you feel thoroughly like an idiot inside. Let the Holy Spirit run through your mind so fast that you feel doubly absurd because you had been falsely told that prayer is trying to get focus. No! Prayer is relaxing and getting out of focus, letting the Holy Spirit "rip" through.

Sometimes evening prayers are crummy. Some idiot reads the Psalm in the wrong voice, or the liturgist is clumsy. You do not mind, but it just ruins the whole thing for you. On days when this sort of thing does not happen, something inside of you says, "Today, I want to pray. I am going to take some time here today." You are hoping that the liturgist is not one who thinks you should only be there three minutes and rings that bell. Then you think, "What on earth should I pray about?" So many things come to you; and if you are like me, due to false early training, you try to latch onto one thing. But, no! Remember the people you criticized in your life--usually they were old clergymen, saints of the Church, who would start praying and would never cease. (I once visited a place where the clergyman finally said, "Now, while Brother Martin finishes his prayer, let's turn to Hymn Number 4.") I have gained a new appreciation for those people.

Evening prayer should express what I described as happening in the morning. You cannot possibly finish because when prayer happens to you there is no end to it. I am suspicious of someone who focuses on one thing in the evening. But even that is wrong; who am I to judge whether or not the Holy Spirit is going to focus you on one thing? Just let Him pray through you the way He will. Here is the place where the leader has to have his intuitive faculties way out. If he does not pray before he goes in there himself, he is in trouble. The first liturgist is not running things. He is trying to let the Spirit that is present be present in whatever form that takes. He should not try to be there thirty minutes or try to leave in five minutes. I think you should push toward brevity. But, when the Spirit breaks loose, you have to know it. Let it go.

I want to say a series of practical things. I am not too happy with the Psalms. In 1971, we counted a total of 2,460 verses in the Psalms. This is an average of 7.3 verses between normal breaks within the Psalms or at their conclusion. This breaks them into about one Psalm per day. I remember once someone read two Psalms. Now, I

know I am eccentric, but I just about went through the roof. My spiritual being is not capable of taking any more spirit images than you have in one poem at once. I would suggest that if the selection is over eight verses, just read until a natural break. It is crucial to read only a brief selection.

The reader's style is crucial as well. Parts of the Bible must be read in low-key drama. We missed a lot in between the words of our Luke readings, because people did not read with interpretation. The Psalms, however, need to be read devotionally. How do you read in devotion? Not very loud, but you must be able to be heard. "The Lord is My Shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters." You have to read it, each in your own way, but in a devotional mood. If the word devotion bothers you, as it does me, then in a reflective mood.

The liturgist's voice must be one in charge in the way a guru's voice would be. The time for public voice is in the morning. There should be no public voice at all in the evening. There are places, very few and very short, where you speak together. I do not even try to speak together. If my speaking blends in with somebody else's, that is fine.

"Lift up your hearts." I like that. I would leave out the "Let us hear the appointed reading of the day, Psalm 26, Verses 1-8." I think the second liturgist should continue with the third part, which is the Gloria. He should introduce that: "All the days of my life I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Then, "O Praise the Lord," followed by the whole group saying the Gloria. Get away from the cultic here. The whole group, quietly, no chanting., no public voice, says: "Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. World without end. Amen." That is included for the same reason the Gloria is behind the Psalms upstairs in Morning Office. Then, the first liturgist says, "Let us pray."

I have thought a long time whether or not you say, "The appointed Collect of the day is the one on such and such." I think not. It was distracting at first trying to figure out which one it was. But it does not bother me anymore. You should do it any way you want to.

The first liturgist says, "Let whosoever is moved by the Holy Spirit lead the people of God assembled here in intercessory prayer for the world, the church and our common calling." I do not worry about "common cause," because of John Gardner's organization. I mean "calling." God has a cause, but I am not too sure these days what my cause is. I am, however, much clearer than ever before on what my calling is.

The liturgist ought to save his own prayer until the very end unless he feels moved by the Spirit to pray before then. But, at the end he ought to offer a prayer and say, "Amen," and then, "The Lord be with you: And with thy spirit. Amen. Amen." Then the tinkle of that bell.

Timing is crucial. The room itself is very important. Although some houses cannot have the luxury of a separate room, you need to have a space set aside. The arrangement in Chicago Centrum is very good, although I think we should have kneelers for everybody. They are more important than you think. The church did not invent those for show, nor did they invent them for comfort. They invented them for what a certain kind of comfort enables you to do.

I have been delighted with experiencing undisciplined discipline. I visited the mean, old, wealthy president of a corporation in Honolulu. We had a lot riding on it, and I was scared. While riding there in the car, I took a great deal of effort to figure out just who was in prayer at that hour. Sitting in his office, it dawned on me that I can no longer escape in any of the twenty-four hours a day from being under the "guns" of prayer. Isn't that something now?

I went to lunch with the Mayor of Bethlehem not long ago. He reminded me that prayers continue in their chapel around the clock.

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That reminded me of the many Roman Catholic orders and other believers in the world who are at prayer. After several months in our midst, a person is very foolish not to decide to BE at prayer every day. This has nothing to do with attending or not for one day-- or six months. It has to do with deciding to BE at prayer.

Oh, what a fine adventure it is to be with a group of people with the guts to move into the most frightening place I have ever been-- into the land of prayer-- to search it out. Have you seen from NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC the map of the bottom of the ocean? Our experience in prayer together looks something like that. I never thought I would participate in such a fine adventure in my lifetime.

--Joseph W. Mathews

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