

Spontaneous Prayer

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In the renewing and reawakening period that we are experiencing, the Church, Christians, and humanity as a whole are undergoing what might adroitly be called a "new thing." A "new thing" is breaking into our lives, and our new lives are breaking into the cracks and crevices of many time-worn events and situations. It might be said that we are attempting to play the game of life in a new way. This is not to say that we are destroying the traditional, but rather that we are contributing to it. To immediately jump over the historical process and give a name to this "new thing" as spontaniety would be similar to syphoning all of the dynamism of creation into a test tube labelled "life". Thus, to deal with the entanglements of our new history we must realize that this new aspect of lived life, our "new thing", is not immediately susceptible to rational analysis or name tagging. Our "new thing" is alive, sprawling and growing, and this activity is not static data for the historian's tools.

If we keep our feet on the historical road, it is somewhat of an injustice to describe our reawakenings and renewals as novel. Reawakenings and renewings are a facet of history. And our contribution to history, our "new thing" is conditioned by our cultural situation, our view of history, or to put it simply—a change in our basic dispositions from those of our forebears. We have already stressed the newness of this historical perspective, but there is another element involved, viz., the "our" of history, con-



temporary man's attachment, possession, formation, and responsibility for today's events, "our" events.

To be spontaneous in the contemporary sense is to be "who you are" without any degree of external constraint or pressure. Spontaneity is an interior movement characterized by freedom or a free spirit. In this description of the spontaneous one dimension is brought strongly into focus: spontaneity is being "who you are" with ease. However, man is not an isolated creature, and his discovery of self can only be insured by contact with people, and the events and situations in which he lives. This is not to insist that through encountering "objects" that spontaneity diminishes. Hardly, for we only know ourselves in relation to another, both thing and person; consequently, spontaneity can only be had in relation to others. To lock ourselves in our rooms is not the secret to being "spontaneous." Hence, any sort of isolation or escapism will not bear fruit in the spontaneity of self.

Furthermore, spontaneity is not a free impulse which is triggered by some other, be it person or object. No, spontaneity implies a certain *harmony* between self and other, between self and situation, between self and history. The reverse of this harmony is an existential "angst" which so often the psychiatrist encounters in his office, and which often plagues the priest in the confessional. Angst, anxiety, pain, call it what you will, but all imply a disharmony, a hampered view or relationship between man, the subject or self, and the world as object, or other. This is not to assert that the harmonious should write off those prone to an existentialistic outlook, the neurotic, or the impenitent; for, harmony in absolute fullness is never attained. In any case, the line of demarcation between the harmonious and those who are not so is quite difficult to discern; it is a state for which man constantly strives.

To achieve a harmonious relation with the world might rightly be considered a task unto death. But man is endowed in his attempt with freedom and decision making faculties. He is constantly faced with choosing one thing among many, e.g., whether to eat this or that, loving one woman among many, etc. Philosophers have for centuries grappled with the "freedom" of man. To some it is the source of his dignity; to others a curse. Speaking of freedom and decision on this level is to speak of them in the practical-philosophic context, but man also has another dimension which is theological. Freedom within this area has been described thusly:

Positively, it signifies the Spirit-given vitality of the heart, released from above, which springs from the revelation and communi-

cation of God's redemptive love in Jesus Christ and has its true basic form in love as the "gift of grace." This means both candid, confident, cheerful freedom towards the Father and, in the spirit of God's redemptive love, loving intimacy with everything created, primarily with men and above all with "all that labor and are burdened."¹

Thus, man is constantly buoyed up in his searchings and meanderings in life with this gift of "grace". Freedom, too, is a God-given gift.

As was stated at the beginning of these reflections, spontaneity is an alive, sprawling and growing concept. We cannot identify any one of these stages which have been mentioned as "spontaneous," and thus we cannot call the end product of freedom and decision "spontaneous." The "spontaneous" is a fiber in the cloth of this whole process, and is especially characterized by "spirit." Moreover, man is more "spiritual" insofar as he exercises himself as "who he is" in the midst of the human situations that he confronts.

To insert the notion of prayer into this context may appear disconcerting, but in an attempt to dispel confusion, let us leave our notion of the spontaneous aside for the moment, and develop an independent notion of prayer.

Simplistically, from the bygone days of our catechetical formation, we have averted time and again to the fact that prayer is the lifting up of our hearts and minds to God. In fact, the perduring framework of this definition might be a contributing factor to some who consider prayer to be "old hat." More contemporarily, prayer may be seen as "ultimately the loving response—somehow made explicit—which accepts God's will to love."² But is this latter notion really enough to bring words of prayer to our lips, to bring us to our knees, or to place us in the quiet atmosphere of prayer? The answer is not all that obvious.

Probably, the major reason why so many of us are quizzical about prayer has been the gradual development of "secularity." Secularity can either raise or destroy the foundations for prayer in any way one wants to describe it. By secularity, I do not mean to use that term in any technical philosophical or theological fashion, but am simply referring to "secular life", and more especially to life in the city. The city of 1968 is, in many ways, the human cosmos. It is the world in which we work, relax, commute to and fro; its problems are our problems. The city is time consumptive. The old family ways have given way to the beat and rhythms of the urban community. Even man's life with God is caught up in the turbulence of city life. Prayer and religion,

however, for the most part, have remained part of the old family way which in the sociological context of familial displacement has resulted in their being relegated to an hour on Sunday or not at all.

What then should be our approach to prayer? Prayer is primarily rooted in the basic rhythms of life itself. We can say that man is a rhythmic animal; he needs certain regular patterns just for survival alone. He eats at certain times of the day, and sleeps at others. He needs to do this. On the physiological and biological levels, synchronized heartbeats, digestive processes, and breathing mechanisms make for the happy man. In the realm of art, it is the man who is most sensitive to the patterns of life, as he sees them unfold, and who imbibes these trends into his work who merits our attention. In all these instances, rhythm is a basic or root feature. Somehow the happy man, the artist, and even the art work itself resonate some chord of rhythm within us.

Alas, rhythm has a part to play in our life with God! Even if we return to our above description of prayer, we can see the pertinence of rhythm. The movement of lifting our hearts and minds to God is a rhythm. How often should we "lift?" How intense should the lifting be? These questions are the basic measures of prayer. Possibly, this description seems too simplistic; let us then return to our more contemporary definition of prayer. In this description, prayer is seen as a loving response to God. As sons of Adam we should realize our responsive capacities, and above all, keep in mind that the one who initiates our relationship with God is God Himself. The basis of this relationship, initiation and response, also implies some sort of rhythmic orientation. For if we are not constant, regular in prayer our efforts will be for naught. We know too that life often bogs us down, and hence, it is necessary to perpetually re-open our channels to God. The fundamental reason for a rhythmic adjustment to prayer is our growing realization of our need for God. We are not yet full or whole men. This will occur only in the eschaton. We need contact with God to insure our tending toward that fullness.

Practically speaking, the Church has realized both our need to pray and her own collective need for prayer. She has adapted a rhythmic pattern of prayer which is concretely reflected in the liturgical cycle of both Mass and the hours of the Divine Office. Moreover, the Church, of late, has become more sensitive to the renewal of her prayer life and toward the establishment of a more spontaneous flow in the expression of prayer. This express concern with its emphasis on the involvement of the faithful was brought to the fore time and again in the

documents of Vatican II, especially in the document on the Liturgy:

The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this mystery of faith (i.e., the Mass), should not be there as strangers or silent spectators.³

One of the most striking innovations for greater participation in the Mass has been the introduction of the "Prayer of the Faithful," which is an attempt to petition the Lord concerning our individual and communal needs. It is an effort to place within the context of the Lord's Supper our disharmonies, while making us, at the same time, cognizant of those of our neighbor.

The concept of man's free movement in time, and the need for man to incorporate a relationship with God within his life cycle cannot be underscored too much. Yet, in the midst of doing this, the problem of man and the city looms ever before us. The stress in this situation is on man's needs as made more complex by the mania of urban life. There is no simple answer to this predicament; city life is explosive, and the urbanite must adapt his relationship or talk with God to intensive bursts of prayer which break through the humdrum of honking horns and screeching breaks. Part of the meaning of the Paschal event is that the Lord became the Lord of all peoples. He has followed us down the pathways of history, and there is no reason to believe that He will abandon us in the city.

It still might appear somewhat awkward to join our notions of prayer with those of spontaneity, but let us begin with the simple statement that spontaneous prayer is the putting of life, individual and collective, into the moments of responding to God. If we take an example from Scripture and analyze it from the point of view of spontaneity and rhythm, our statement will take on a deeper significance. The "Our Father" presents us with an ideal picture of what we are aiming to achieve. It is not only the prayer of Christ, but more apropos, it was spoken from the *life* of Jesus, and manifests a distinctive inner rhythm:

Say this when you pray:

Father, may your name be held holy,
 your kingdom come;
 give us each day our daily bread,
 and forgive us our sins,
 for we forgive each other who is in debt to us.
 And do not put us to the test. (Luke 11:2-4)

This is the life of Jesus: an address, a greeting to the Father, His Father, Whom His life sought to reveal. There is also a reference, not explicit and possibly added later, to the spirit which the Jerusalem Bible makes note of:

“Give us each day our daily bread,”^b.
b. var. (borrowed perhaps from a
baptismal liturgy) “may your Holy
Spirit come down on us and cleanse
us.”⁵

The thrust of Christ’s salvific mission and life presents itself in His expression and concern over the “kingdom.” Jesus’ relation to man is not forgotten for He pleads for forgiveness of sins, and a mutual forgiveness that Christians should have one for the other. His prayer ends with His recognition of His own human dependence on God, and more pointedly, the dependence of all of us on God, that we might not have to endure the impossible in our lives.

Some might argue that this prayer is hardly a spontaneous one. They would contend that, first of all, the text of Luke is the product of oral translation and written formalization; secondly, some parts of this version of the Our Father, or possibly the prayer as a whole, may have been influenced liturgically. Even if this is so, the point can still be made that both the Gospels and the liturgy had its roots in the living words and deeds of Jesus Himself. By the living words and deeds of Jesus is meant the life, the spirit of Jesus as He “perfected revelation . . . through His whole work of making Himself present and manifesting Himself: through His words and deeds, His signs and wonders, but especially through His death and glorious resurrection from the dead and the final sending of the Spirit of truth.”⁶ It must, however, be admitted that the degree of spontaneity in Jesus’ prayer can not be known with much certitude, but the elements of the prayer: Father, kingdom, forgiveness, etc. indicate quite strongly those elements for which Jesus lived and loved. Furthermore, there is a rhythm or regular beat to this prayer. It expresses itself in this form: address, praise, and petition. First, there is Christ’s greeting to the Father; then, there is the hope of Jesus and us that the Father’s name will always be held as holy; and, lastly, there is our plea for forgiveness, and the expression of our desire to be freed from being put to the test. Many will say that this form is the exact contrary to what is commonly meant by rhythm, but Jesus apparently used some sort of form. To the man who seeks to be prayerful form is never deadening, but is the very skeleton on which one builds a prayer life. Even a Sister Corita

subjects her spontaneity to a framework. However, she knows how to use form and has mastered it; she knows how to make life as she experiences it break into "form."

Prayer, then, is spontaneous or formal, or both. The overriding concern, however, of one who seeks to pray should not be that of free expression, but rather that of how we can better express our lives, our urban lives, in prayer. Yet, while the experts argue about prayer in the abstract, most of us are still faced with concrete problems about prayer which are quite concrete. Some parishes, for instance, still have Mass facing the wall, and in many cases the liturgy is still enacted in an overly formalized way. Still we must pray. We cannot, however, set ourselves up as authorities on the liturgy, and yet we must also remember that we, too, have a voice in these matters. Especially in the area of liturgy, we must avoid fostering our own personal liturgical ideals to the detriment of the community. For as we have said earlier, we discover "who we are" only in relation to others, be they persons, objects, situations, or history.

The process of self-discovery is also unveiled in the fonts of prayer even, I might add, when the Latin words of a Mass might grate our ears, or when the Mass readings are read in a monotonous, less than satisfactory fashion; it must be remembered that a deeper rhythm is beating. For liturgy, the apex of prayer, it must be recalled, has its foundations in the Paschal event, and the discoveries that we should be making should be in relation to that event. Lastly, however, and most importantly, we must not forget that faith is still the inner beat of our Christian lives. The question is how far will we allow our faith in prayer to lead us?

FOOTNOTES

¹ Karl Rahner, S.J., and Hebert Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary*, ed., Cornelius Ernest, O.P., trans. Richard Strachan. New York: Herder and Herder, 1965, p. 179.

² *Ibid.*, p. 370.

³ "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy", chap. 2, para. 48; found in: *The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, S.J., and Joseph Gallagher, editors. New York: America Press. 1966, p. 154.

⁴ This translation is from the *Jerusalem Bible*, "The Gospel According to Saint Luke", p. 111.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111; cf. footnotes.

⁶ "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation", chap. 1, para. 4, *op. cit.*, *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 113.