

The Parish as a School of Prayer

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Christ came among us to show us the Way to the Father. In fact, we learned by His life that *He is this Way* (Jn. 14:6). This truth from revelation evokes awe and wonder in those who allow the mystery of Christ to reach their hearts. The normal setting for such an encounter with Christ is deep within the heart but in the context of parish sacramental life. The possibility of such an encounter in its simple accessibility to all persons could not be greater proof of God's love for us. His love is ever near and salvation is accessible not arcane or burdensome. And yet, the intimacy Christ offers is oftentimes only partially accepted. Why are some Catholics seemingly satisfied with only a superficial relationship with Christ?

The Culture of Distraction

The answer to this question is a deep mystery, a mystery wrapped up in our fallen nature, in our penchant toward negating the spiritual in favor of the “worldly”, the immediate, and the distracting. We live in a culture of distraction—addiction to technological entertainment, impatience with all manner of suffering or limit, a thirst for immediacy, an obsession with lust, a craving for speed, a decadent voracity for food. In receiving this culture within our minds and affect we receive only anxiety. Due to our sophistication in technology we have more leisure but, unfortunately, no rest. Why? Simply put, when the culture of distraction defines us we become more filled with the self, the ego. Everything becomes measured on the scale of usefulness to and entertainment for *the self*. Intrinsic value is jettisoned for utilitarian value. The culture of

distraction bequeaths to us a profound loneliness, which is the scent of dead and dying things. At the heart of our times is a continual anxiety because we are fighting for our lives...for our lives to be lived out of our souls, and not out of the immediate needs *of the moment*. What is most pathetic, however, is that we think we are living meaningful lives simply because we are busy, a busy-ness that is in truth only our distracted egos avoiding spiritual substance.

If intimacy with Christ is ever to define our lives and form our characters then we must accept the antidote to this culture of distraction. Such an antidote is already at hand...it is the life of the parish emanating from the mystery of the sacraments. And at the core of this life is the simple yet frequently resisted key to ending our feverish cultural pace: prayer. Rest is found only in communion with God and others.

Christ is accessible to us from within the heart and from within the heart of the parish, the sacraments, but that doesn't mean that such accessibility is not without its obstacles. Since we are a culture addicted to immediate distractions, to turn within and listen to the Sacred Heart speaking to our human heart will require spiritual transformation. In this conversion there will be some pain or suffering. Once we begin to turn toward a life of interiority and away from our previous lives of "enjoying" distractions we will resist the turn since these former values are now threatened. In other words, our previous habits of finding consolation in the culture of distraction will not go gently away. Due to this spiritual struggle prayer may not *at first* seem attractive. It might be a place of struggle where the memories of past cultural consolations push against the promise and hope of the peace that is coming in communion with Christ. This struggle is a sign of a necessary purification of will, desire and memory. Prayer resists having the value of immediate

gratification imposed upon it as it prepares us to receive a deeper and longer lasting value.

Prayer is one of the most longed for realities and therefore, perhaps, one of the most romanticized realities. In truth prayer is a commitment of the will as is any act of love. We commit ourselves to prayer when we desire to know Him who is its object. Prayer is a way of living fully, it is being fully alive, a way of engaging reality with mind, heart and will. Prayer welcomes the transfiguration that accompanies our commitment to love God from within the human heart in the context of sacrament and parish community. In time this life will carry consolations but to desire communion with the Holy is to first enter a foreign world. This world beckons us by way of our own restlessness, our own attempts at radical independence from God and the misery that follows such ill-fated choices. From within our misery, our emptiness, we hear the call to ecstasy. Such misery gives rise to our questions about life's meaning, about our own individual choices, and our use of freedom. When we receive prayer as the gift that it is we welcome its fruit which is peace, an interior life in regular, if not constant, communion with the Divine. To enter prayer then is to begin a life of hope.

The Priest as Spiritual Teacher

This process of purification is to occur in parish life under the guidance of priests who are committed to relinquishing their own ego in favor of a consciousness that welcomes an ever deepening receptivity to the Word. The priest is to be our spiritual master, the one who teaches us that life is a prayer. As John Paul II encouraged, "Your first duty as Pastors is not projects and organizations but to lead your people to a deep

intimacy with the Trinity.”¹ From such a priest we learn to receive grace and to make ourselves available to the Paschal Mystery, not as a theological idea but as the very principle of living.

While acknowledging the demands of contemporary parish life, a challenging question for pastors still arises: who is going to transform the parish into a school of prayer if he does not? An even deeper question can be put forward to pastors: will you know the depths of happiness as a priest if you do not become a teacher of prayer? What was the sacrifice of wife and family for if not to offer your life so that others may enter the deepest of intimacy with God? Prayer life, to emphasize what was said above, is NOT natural to us. We need grace to enter the struggle to commune with God and leave distraction and sin behind. “If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Think of what is above, not of what is on earth” (Col. 3:1-2). Such thinking does not alight upon us as an easy habit and so the urgency to find teachers of prayer becomes self-evident. If the priest is to become a teacher of prayer what might he begin to ponder to assist him, or his delegates, in taking the parish in the direction of becoming a school of prayer?

Initiating a School of Prayer

First, the pastor ought to make the call to his parish to enter a life of prayer from out of his own spiritual conversion, one that has marked his identity and ministry. At minimum the call ought to emerge from *his own desire* to deepen whatever level of intimacy his prayer life has achieved thus far in his priestly life. The authenticity of the call, and the passion which commits the pastor to make this call continual, and not episodic, will be key to the success of creating parishes as schools of prayer. This does

¹ Pope John Paul II, Address to the Austrian Bishops.

not mean that the pastor teaches or preaches in an autobiographical manner. Rather, he draws his passion to teach about the saints' prayer or liturgical prayer or *lectio divina* from *the power* of his own conversion. He draws attention not to himself but to the interior life and its fruits.

Second, understanding the parish as a school of prayer is not idiosyncratic but comes forth from the mystery of Christ Himself whose very presence ignited a rush of desire in the apostles, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Lk. 11:1)" In our day Pope John Paul II encouraged parishes to become schools of prayer.

"Yes... our Christian communities must become *genuine "schools" of prayer*, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly "falls in love". Intense prayer, yes, but it does not distract us from our commitment to history: by opening our heart to the love of God it also opens it to the love of our brothers and sisters, and makes us capable of shaping history according to God's plan." ²

Third, consider in the quote above how the Pope had to quell the fears of some believers who hold that prayer is a rival to ministry. On the contrary, prayer doesn't distract us from service, it is *the origin of Christian charity*, it is the *sustenance* of Christian charity, and it is the *power* of Christian charity. These unfounded fears that prayer undermines service actually create a profound contradiction in the heart of Christians. To name prayer as the foe of service is to name *it* as the distraction of our age, when in fact prayer is *the cure* for the unanchored mind that haunts the present culture. Such fears about prayer crop up in ecclesial environments that have become overly politicized. It is as if the parish's social ministry is born from political ideology rather

² *NOVO MILLENNIO INEUNTE* 2001, n. 33; see also, John Paul II, "The Eucharist as a School of Prayer," *Origins* 28 (April 8, 1999): 729.

than from the heart of Christ. No ministry of service is fruitful unless it flows from prayer. That is, no ministry will move the minister, and those whom he or she serves, toward salvation if it does not found its acts of charity upon communion with the Savior. Of course non praying people can serve the poor, teach, run hospitals, and fight against attacks on the unborn, the elderly, and minorities. By which I mean that such good work can reach a utilitarian end—mouths are fed, lessons are learned and people are healed, but it does not reach its *evangelical ecclesial end*. In ministry Christ is to become explicitly known. In such ministry knowledge of Christ would be received by both the minister and those who benefit from such a commitment of service. Communion with Christ *is* what distinguishes ministry from good deeds, and justifies a parish putting its resources into such benevolence. In fact, today, when Catholic universities, hospitals and other Catholic agencies are downplaying their explicit Catholic identity in favor of the codes of pluralism, tolerance and hospitality it redounds to the parish to keep the explicit nature of belief in Christ alive. Few, if any other institutions within the church will teach prayer or are as free to do so today as is the parish. And so, to call the parish a school of prayer is not to undermine its public mission but instead it is to establish this mission upon the only enduring reality in any and all service...the community's love of Jesus Christ as a response to *His* enduring love. To this end the pastor guides the parish to cherish the vital role that prayer plays in the public role of parish life.

Fourth, due to the nature of parish life today the pastor may want to focus his limited time to teaching his diaconal or religious education staff to become teachers of prayer. Directly with his people, then, the pastor may want to contemplate using the pulpit in new and powerful ways to evoke within parishioners a commitment to prayer.

As St. Peter Eymard noted, “the preacher is a man who prays out loud.”³ In other words, the homily ought not to be a time for information about scripture but it ought to be a living *lectio divina*, an expression of the intimacy the pastor has with Christ, the Word. In so doing the pastor allows the pulpit to become an arena for the Spirit’s movement. This intimacy with Christ that possesses the pastor is not the kind that causes embarrassment for the congregation as when spouses give too much detail about their own feelings for one another. Instead this intimacy informs the homily in a way that leaves the congregation more interested in Christ than in the homilist. This form of communication will heal, convert, release gifts, and deepen contemplation in the parishioners because it comes from the docility of the pastor toward the Spirit. It would seem that the day is long passed for homilies to be only expressions of the critical historical method learned in seminary class. Instead, the homily needs to be a testimony to the *living* God. Hopefully, due to papal encouragement,⁴ the historical critical method will be seen simply as a tool and not the exclusive way of intelligently approaching the scripture for homily preparation. The parish will not become prayerful by simply having the homilist lead the people in recollections about past history or the intentions of the scriptural authors (e.g. homilies that are pulpit instruction on the political realities of Jesus’ day, the variegated kinds of religious leaders and their roles, the reduction of the supernatural to the natural or superstitious, etc). So, if other matters press at the pastor and he cannot be the direct teacher of prayer then he can guide the whole process by use of the pulpit, and by training the trainers of prayer. In this way he can be seen to encourage the people’s prayerfulness and complement the adult faith formation already happening in the parish.

³ Andre Guitton, *Eymard: Apostle of the Eucharist* (Ponteranica: Centro Eucharistico 1996) p. 328.

⁴ John Paul II n. 9 in “Introduction” The Pontifical Biblical Commission’s, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* 1993; see also, Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, (NY: Doubleday, 2007).

Keeping Prayer Simple

Most believers would rather do most anything else than pray. This is our pathetic state; to disdain that which is the fount of our joy. Therefore, it is best to follow a simple approach to prayer, one that is teachable to all. St Peter Eymard, parish priest, lays the groundwork for such an approach. Note, however, that this simple approach to prayer while accessible to all manner of parishioner is hardly without depth. In fact, from the following statement by Peter Eymard one could catechize on prayer for many an hour.

“In your prayer, seek to nourish yourself on God, rather than...humbling yourself. To do this: nourish your mind with the truth personified in God’s goodness towards you...his personal love; here is the secret of true prayer. See the action and mind of God IN HIS LOVE FOR YOU! Then, in wonder, your soul will cry out... ‘How good you are my God. What can I do for you? What will please you?’ There is the fire of the furnace.”⁵

At the depths of the mystery of prayer is this profound truth received by Eymard, “What must I do? I must give myself to Jesus Christ and serve him BY THIS GIFT, the holocaust of self.... ‘I want not what is yours but you’” [says the Lord].⁶

Eymard evokes a familiar pattern within his simple form of prayer, that of call and response. God comes to us first and calls to us, inviting us to attend to His loving Presence. We respond to God in prayer in and through Christ, who is the Open Door, through which all of God’s children can walk to encounter the Father’s love.⁷ In coming

⁵Guitton , p. 36.

⁶ Guitton p. 227.

⁷ See Raymond Gawronski, *Word and Silence* (London:T&T Clark, 1995) p. 149.

to the Father in prayer we not only receive His Presence but we receive our Mission in life. One can only really pray, have communion with God, from within obedience to one's mission.⁸ So, this implies that the pastor must teach not only the virtue of *receptivity* to God's loving presence but also its sister virtue, the skill of *discernment*. Once we are **open to God's love**, we can then **distinguish between interior movements born of unpurified desire, and movements that carry the call of God to deeper intimacy and mission (vocation)**. And so the parish is called to school its people in three movements of prayer.

- A. Parish members are to learn to *receive* spiritual nourishment from God's love.
- B. Parish members are to learn how to *discern* the mission that such a love gives to each member.
- C. Having fully received a mission parish members now allow their prayers to arise from within their *enacted fidelity* to it.

Receptivity leads to *discernment* which leads to *mission* which leads to *the holocaust of the selfish ego* and the ever deepening intimacy between one's self-offering to God and God's reception of this offering as His own gift to the one who prays.⁹ At the depths of the mystery of prayer is this profound truth received by Eymard, "What must I do? I must give myself to Jesus Christ and serve him BY THE GIVING, the holocaust of self.... 'I want not what is yours but you' [says the Lord]."¹⁰ What can pastors learn

⁸ Gawronski, p. 163.

⁹ There is a complementary method of prayer, equally simple, found in the writings of Jean Jacques Olier. We offer ourselves to God in light of our sins and ask for forgiveness, we adore Jesus before our eyes, we open our heart to Him in communion interiorly, and finally we beg Him to accomplish His will in our actions this day. (see, *Alive For God In Christ*, Proceedings, Buffalo: St John Eudes Center 1995, pp109-111)

¹⁰ Guittou, p. 227.

about prayer, and how to teach it, from this powerful description of its nature? Let's look now, in some detail, at Eymard's constitution on prayer.

A Simple Blueprint for Prayer

“In your prayer, seek to nourish yourself on God, rather than...humbling yourself. To do this: nourish your mind with the truth personified in God's goodness towards you...his personal love; here is the secret of true prayer. See the action and mind of God IN HIS LOVE FOR YOU! Then, in wonder, your soul will cry out... ‘How good you are my God. What can I do for you? What will please you?’ There is the fire of the furnace.”

God will do most of the work in developing our character into one that is constituted by prayer. Prayer itself will humble us, its demand for time, its internal sufferings in the early stages of our commitment to it, its various graces that instruct us in our own weaknesses and God's generosity. Primarily we are called to feed off of prayer; time with God is to become our food. This food is simply the reality of God as He presents Himself to our minds as truth and our wills as goodness itself. In receiving such our intellect is enlightened and our desires purified and inflamed anew by the Spirit, who is the Divine encounter. Eymard counsels that this is the ‘secret’ of prayer: to receive the love of God.¹¹ With this ‘secret’ we are near the heart of what ignites a parish to become a spiritual community. Of course no pastor can manufacture or conjure receptivity in his people toward the goodness of God's love, but he can intercede for his people to be open to such, describe what such means, give testimony that such is not simply possible but DESIRED by God. God wants to reach his people in and through the life of the parish.

¹¹ See also, Jean Corborn, *The Wellspring of Worship* (San Francisco, Ignatius, 2005) p. 37. “The most fruitful activity of the human person is to be able to receive the love of God.”

Finally, the pastor may also offer personal sacrifices interceding that his people will receive the love of God by his own fasting, prayer and works of charity.

A contemporary of St Peter Eymard, St John Vianney, once noted that, “There will come a time when many will be *so tired of men* that they will not be able to hear about God without crying.” Bishop Bagnard (present day bishop of the diocese where the Cure D’Ars lived) said, “I believe that it is in our time now that people are longing for God and that we, as priests have to bring them to Him.”¹²

The feeling of being “tired of men” can **itself** be the stirring of the Holy Spirit in us. The Spirit is already moving us to find little meaning in the superficialities of our age and look for sturdier fare in communion with Himself. Sometimes then, prayer begins when the weight of human folly presses upon our consciousness: so much political division, rationalizing of sin, fear and tepidity toward witnessing for the faith. Such dead weight presses upon us and we cry out, we are “tired of men.” Sometimes we are so caught up in the current age that we don’t even know why we are saddened, depressed, lethargic. In due course the pastor can open the eyes of his parish by inviting its members to leave the dispositions toward distraction and false meaning behind, and to instead find refreshment in receiving God in prayer. The tears that will flow are a combination of hope and regret. One regrets the choice to sin, choices that make one’s life so puny, self-enclosed and superficial. Alternately, one hopes the Father will bequeath to us a new identity, one that is defined by His providence and care.

Ultimately, being “tired of men” does not mean a retreat from culture it means something more demanding: a dedication to Christ IN CULTURE. By way of the laity and their secular character, new dispositions can fill the culture with hope, joy, justice

¹² “Speech by Bishop Bagnard” in *The Boston Pilot*, Friday October 20 2006.

and love, dispositions born of intimacy with God rather than those born of affection for this passing age. Eymard is clear that these dispositions will never fill the secular culture if parishioners do not *let the desire of God to be with them* to extinguish sin.

“But, O God, Jesus is loved little The reason is that we love...the self all the while...We are like a ship fastened to the shore; it floats on the water of the sea, but it does not leave its moorings; it merely bobs up and down...O my God sever these moorings...plunge me into the sea....”¹³

To be “tired of men” can be the beginning of our intercession to God to “plunge us into the sea.” We are meant to “go deep” by way of the disciplines, celebrations and challenges of parish life. The entire regimen of parish life is ordered toward preparing us to cry out to God, “sever these moorings.” All good pastors desire to take parishioners deep, to take them into the spiritual life and not leave them “fastened to the shore” of this current culture.

After receiving the love of God and noticing the weight of our sins in this age we then respond. “Then, in wonder, your soul will cry out... ‘How good you are my God. What can I do for you? What will please you?’ *There* is the fire of the furnace.” From out of the power of receiving His love in contrast to the anemia of popular culture and the fare it offers, the Heart realizes that it has found true food, something to really give nourishment to the soul. The heart has received the love of God in the Spirit dwelling within. As with all love once it is received we are transformed by its nature and so become like that which we have received. So we ask, “now what may I do for you? How may I give my life to you God?” Eymard notes that this response, the oblation of the selfish self to God, is the fire, the source of our life’s meaning. To receive the love of God and then respond

¹³ Guitton, p. 232.

with the gift of self is the fruit of allowing the Eucharist to penetrate one's life. The entire mystery of Christ's life, death and resurrection is present in the Eucharist and each parishioner receives this mystery in Holy Communion. When subjective and communal conditions are right (that is when the individual and the community actively seek *to receive* the grace of salvation) then to form the human person in holiness is really the "triumph of the Eucharist."¹⁴ Our response to Christ is to make the transformation He is working in us by way of the Eucharist, and our continuing prayer to receive this mystery *a dedicated public life*. By the power of prayer our lives are to become a transformed public life giving witness to Christ.

At the depths of the mystery of prayer is this profound truth received by Eymard, "What must I do? I must give myself to Jesus Christ and serve him BY THE GIFT, the holocaust of self... I want not what is yours but you' [says the Lord]."¹⁵

The pastor aims his people toward active interiority, toward a life where the activity of prayer in the heart is as real as one's schedule dictating the day's activities, from chores, to shopping, to work, to leisure. When the parish becomes a school of prayer its members notice a shift in consciousness wherein prayer becomes as real as other activities. Prayer is not a dream or a "waste of time" or something for "introverts." Prayer is who we are becoming as we actively seek to have the Eucharist, the very mystery of Jesus' self offering upon the cross define our lives. God is only interested in His relationship with us, "I want not what is yours but YOU." This interest in us on God's part is both consoling and frightening as we alternately seek Him and seek to hide from Him in our

¹⁴ Guitton, p. 258.

¹⁵ Guitton, p. 227.

distracted modern lives. We seek Him because the comfort and meaning our sins give is meager, we hide from Him because it means leaving this meager, albeit habitual, food behind. Sin is a food one can come to love. Prayer is desperately needed by we who find meaning in choosing against our very welfare. From the heart of the parish a cry goes out, “Have mercy on us.” He will have mercy because His heart is configured to respond in love to those who languish in sin.¹⁶

Finally, we look to Mary, the Mother of God, prototype of the Church at prayer. Her life indicates what God is able to do in and through us when we are totally docile to the life of the Spirit within. If the parish is to become a school of prayer, Mary must lead us to her spouse the Holy Spirit and we must receive this Divine Spouse from within our hearts thus igniting a desire for holiness. Practically, we look to Mary as she led the small group of apostles into prayer at Pentecost as they awaited the coming of her Spouse upon them and the whole church. Any transformation of the parish into a school of prayer will begin in small cells of praying men and women and then, in time, flame out to larger venues. In reverencing this smallness we follow the very way of God at Pentecost. This small beginning, however, is only in the service of the hope that all in the parish will become pray-ers of great depth.

Conclusion

The parish when fully established as itself *is a school of prayer*. It is a sacramental community open to being affected by the movements of God in love toward each and every member. This school has its own dean; the pastor. This dean loves prayer

¹⁶ For a remedy to one’s own love of sin see: James Keating, “The Eucharist and the Healing of Affection for Sin” (Emmanuel March/April 2007) 107ff.

more than any other reality because he has given his life over to God completely and the activity of serving God's people *even as he remains in contemplation*. The curriculum of this school is elementary: teach the people the signs of God desiring to come close (an exhaustion with "this age" and all its distractions). Teach the people to receive God's love (allow the affections to carry God's grace to the mind and will). Teach the people to discern the movements of God in the soul (to distinguish immediate passing emotions and ideas from those that carry a divine invitation to healing and truth). Teach the people how to make a self-offering to God the Father during the Eucharistic Liturgy, especially after the reception of Holy Communion (saying simply, "Jesus, take us to the Father"). Teach the people that *in* their own self offering God is receiving them and *in* His receiving them He is giving them their greatest gift: communion with the Divine. In this pattern of life a parish places prayer at its core and from this core the parish disposition changes, a change that focuses upon the mission identity of the laity, a mission built upon sharing this virtue of communion with God with the world. Such a sharing is not pious in some sentimental way, but in fact, such a sharing may ask for courage, endurance and for one to withstand rejection. Praying is only sentimental in those who have never really encountered Christ and His words about discipleship being a cross and not simply consolation (Mk 8:34). Eymard takes us to the core of what prayer asks of us and asks our parishes to become:

"My heart must draw its inspiration from the heart of Jesus...love alone forms the mind...thought depends on love...I must be to Jesus what Jesus was to His Father... [eagerly and totally available]." ¹⁷

¹⁷ Guitton, p. 231.

