

Praying Alone

*Prayer and work
are not whole without each other.*

Rule for a New Brother
Blessed Sacrament Fathers
Brackkenstein Community, Holland

If there is one thing, one belief that Christian carers have in common, it is the conviction that they don't pray enough! The majority of men and women, in vows or not, who are struggling to live their lives according to the demands of the gospel are convinced of the need for prayer – but they find it very difficult to carry this conviction into practice. I should say at the outset that I do not think I pray enough either, but at least this gives me some insight into the problems.

What are the difficulties then, in combining a ministry of caring with a life of prayer – is it even possible? Should those of us who feel called to a deep relationship with God in prayer down tools and make for the nearest Carmelite or Benedictine monastery? Many of us do, of course, and emerge bruised and perplexed, one, five or even twenty years later. Some have the good sense to know without trying the life that they could not survive cooped up in a convent, but perhaps they decide that, since they have no calling to the religious life they can have no calling to prayer.

I believe that one of the problems in helping people to combine a life of prayer with an active apostolate is a purely semantic issue: the meaning of the word *contemplative*. In modern religious parlance, there are two broad categories of religious life: the *active* and the *contemplative*. Those men and women called to the active life involve themselves in such activities as nursing or teaching or other pastoral activities. They are expected to say their prayers night and morning

and get on with their work in between. No one expects of them that they will become mystics or contemplatives: they are the Marthas, the busy ones whose job it is to wash feet, to serve. The contemplative life, we are brought up to believe, is for those with a special vocation for prayer, with a higher calling. These are the Marys, those who have 'chosen the better part'. They must leave 'the world' to its own devices, withdrawing from its pleasures, distractions and demands so that they can devote their life wholly to God. These are the monastic men and women, the Carmelites, the Cistercians and the Benedictines: those who would embrace the dry martyrdom of renunciation, and who are truly fools for Christ.

I believe that this division into the 'active' and the 'contemplative' life is not only simplistic, but inaccurate. I believe, furthermore, that it is actually quite dangerous, for people with a desire for prayer but unfitted for the *enclosed* life find themselves in convents where they are ill at ease and unhappy. Such men or women, knowing that they are called to a life of prayer, may enter monastery after monastery, only to leave each one emotionally wounded and with an ever deepening sense of failure. Others who never even make it into the cloisters spend their lives looking wistfully through the wrong side of the grille wishing they too had a 'vocation' to be a contemplative.

The truth is, of course, that while a few people are indeed both attracted and suited to the enclosed religious life, the vast majority of us must live out our discipleship in the wider community, marrying for better or for worse, rearing our children and earning our living as best we may. But though only a minority of people are called to the *enclosed* life of the monk or nun, a great many find themselves drawn to a life of contemplative prayer. That is why it is so important that we do not use the words *enclosed* and *contemplative* interchangeably, for while it is true that some men and women find that their contemplative prayer flowers in the desert of the monastery, others will grow *only* in the midst of society, in the marketplace. If a man or woman experiences that indefinable hunger for God and for prayer that are the signs of a contemplative vocation they must discern, *not* whether or not they have a calling *to* prayer, but *where*, desert or marketplace, they should live out that calling.

To some people there is great mystery and grace about the

monastic life: a mystery heightened by the beauty of the liturgy and the medieval clothes worn by monks and nuns. Even now, when I have spent eighteen months on the 'inside', my heart thrills to the sound of the Gregorian chant and the sight of black cowled or veiled figures gliding down a bare cloister. I remember with deep nostalgia the stillness after Compline at Stanbrook or the peal of the Ampleforth bell announcing the Grand Silence. My memories of the eighteen months I spent as a real nun, rather than a make-believe one, are infinitely less romantic, but even so I recall the peace that comes with a life which is deeply caught up in the rhythms of the liturgy and in which silence plays an integral part.

Why then, did I not stay? The answer is simple: I am not temperamentally suited to the enclosed life. I need contact with other people to remain healthy and outward-looking: I need to serve. So what of us failed monks, the contemplatives manqués who lust for the choral office, the Grand Silence and Lectio Divina in a sunlit corner of the cloister: should we admit our second-best status as Marthas or work out a way in which we can have the best of both worlds? For me it is the 'apostolic' spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola which best meets my needs, for it is a way of being in which prayer and action are not compartmentalised but inexorably interwoven and in which, ideally, action springs *from* contemplation. It is a way of living out the gospel which sees God in all things: in the kitchen, in the marketplace, in anguish and in peace. God is at work in his universe and in his creatures, labouring and loving, shaping and moulding like the great potter of the monk William: 'You are the potter, we are the clay.'

Spirituality is about living with, in and for God and the great spiritualities of the church are just the ways in which different personalities have found their own idiosyncratic way to God. We may have found that one particular way suits us to a tee or we may be eclectic, making for ourselves a mongrel way which is, for us, the way of the Lord. Ignatius was a soldier and he brings to the church the way of an inner discipline. Misunderstood, his way can seem rigid and stultifying; read aright it gives a great freedom from the heart. You get the best feel of Ignatius in his Principle and Foundation (quoted above, p. 135). He states quite simply the reason for our existence: we are to praise, revere and serve the Lord our

God. Everything else is to help us do just that. So time and money, food and clothes, work and leisure are all to be used or discarded in so far as they help us attain the end for which we are created. It is a marvellously flexible, adaptable philosophy, stunning in its simplicity and ruthless in its single-mindedness. In particular it is a way which is not hung up on rituals, lifestyle or ways of dressing. If dressing up in the garb of a fifteenth-century widow helps you to serve God, Ignatius is saying, go for it. If you find it gets in the way, see how you get on in jeans; but do not kid yourself that one outfit is holier than the other. Of course he did not actually say that, but I like to think he might have done if he lived today. 'I will enter upon the meditation, now kneeling, now prostrate on the ground, now lying face upwards, now seated, now standing, always being intent on seeking what I desire' (*Spiritual Exercises*, no. 76). If my extrapolation from number 76 in the Exercises is taking a little liberty with Ignatius, it gives us an opportunity to dwell upon the spirit and wisdom of what he is saying about personal prayer. Another way of putting it would be in the words of the Benedictine abbot John Chapman who wrote with marvellous English simplicity, 'Pray as you can and not as you can't.' If the rosary is your thing, say it and love it, but if it screws you up to repeat the Hail Mary fifty times in ten minutes, do not feel guilty: find out what *does* suit you and stick to it. If you feel comfortable praying crosslegged on the floor with a candle and an icon, lovely; but do not be surprised if your charismatic friends want to sit in a circle singing in tongues or your Irish auntie has to go to church to say the Stations of the Cross. In the Father's house there are many mansions – if it was not so, he would have told us. In the human race there are many cultures and many tastes and we must let people pray in the way that is right for them, and hope that they will let us do the same.

This respect for our neighbour must be carried inwards as respect for our own heart because what is good for us one day will not necessarily be right for every day. There is a great art in learning to pray with your inclinations rather than doggedly against them:

Your prayer will take countless forms
because it is the echo of your life,

and a reflection of the inexhaustible light
in which God dwells.

Rule for a New Brother

Perhaps then, it is worth looking at a few of the different ways in which we can pray. I would dare to say that no one is superior or preferable to the other: it is a question of what is given to you, of what you are able for. The first way we learn to pray is with words: words taught us by our parents or guardians – God bless Mummy and Daddy or the Our Father. These early prayers may stay with us until we are still grey haired so that we wake with a muttered:

My God I offer to you this day
All I shall think or do or say . . .

Using other people's words is something that most people do some of the time. Which words we use does not seem to matter a lot to me (except in so far as they may reveal that our theology is a bit rocky!). For some of us the Psalms will be food and drink, for others the Book of Common Prayer or other set prayers. Sometimes we will dwell upon the words, at other times we will barely notice them, using them almost as a mantra to still our restless hearts or as a magic carpet carrying our unspoken longing to God.

At other times, set words will pall and our own phrases well up from the heart. 'Lord help me. I'm so bloody miserable. What on earth am I going to do?' We should always feel free to pray whatever words are in our hearts for what manner of a God would reject the cries of his child?

Sometimes, of course, we need no words. Our hearts swell with an inarticulate longing or are somehow silenced so that no words are necessary. Then we should just sit in silence, longing, hurting, loving or bored, just being in the presence of the one who made us.

These are all respectable, well recognised ways of praying but there is nothing to stop us inventing our own. I love to pray on the beach in the early morning and will walk along the very edge of the sea singing whatever psalm is in my head to no particular tune and in no known harmony. Other times I take a stick or my toes and write I LOVE YOU in enormous letters in the sand – leaving it to the tide to wash it away or

some bemused dog walker to wonder what crazy lovers have been cavorting in the waves.

One thing which I think stops a lot of people from praying is a lack of understanding of what Ignatius calls *consolation* and *desolation*. Consolation (with sun) is the term used to describe those positive feelings of faith, hope and love. It is an overflowing of the desire for God into the feelings. It is a pleasant experience, but one which we must not count upon because anyone who prays regularly will experience boredom and dryness, not through lack of love, but for many different sometimes quite mundane reasons. It is important to hold in mind that prayer is an act of the will and if we make time to attend to God, then we are praying, even if all we feel is our fatigue, our rumbling stomach or the myriads of distractions that overrun our conscious minds. Desolation (without sun), in Ignatius's language is negative feeling in relation to God and his will. It may be the result of depression or fatigue or perhaps some conflict between our different needs and desires. But whether our prayer be characterised by consolation or by dryness and turmoil, what matters is that we should pray and keep on praying.

Here it is worth speaking of discipline in the spiritual life. Those who choose and can adapt to life in a monastery have one great advantage: their whole life is structured and geared to the liturgy. The bell wakes them from sleep and they go to church and so on, throughout the day. Those of us in the world, however, must devise our own framework or prayer will be rapidly squeezed out of life by work or other demands. Each of us must find a routine that fits with his temperament and lifestyle: and it must be a routine that works, not an impossible counsel of perfection. It matters little how we organise ourselves, just that we do it. Some people will find it easier to make time in the morning, others the evening and some in the middle of the day. For me the morning is the easiest time and I pray for about half an hour each day when I wake up. There are days when I can pray in the evening too, but often I am too tired and restless to settle down. There are two points to make here. The first is that, the more you pray, the more you will find that you want to pray. If you establish a daily routine of prayer, missing it will become almost impossible because there will be a hunger for it, a sense of something missing. Conversely, the less you pray the

less you will want to pray and the more impossible it will seem to make time. The other thing is that if you make time for prayer in a regular disciplined way, there will be a great spin-off because prayer will start to overflow into the rest of your life so that you will find yourself praying at the bus stop, driving the car, or while watching television. In the same way that thoughts of the beloved will crowd into the lover's consciousness, so thoughts of God will come easily in and out of the mind of the person who is faithful in prayer.

Discipline in prayer and in one's way of living leads in time to real freedom of spirit so that one learns to adapt quite unconsciously to one's own and other people's needs. Ignatius is quite clear on this, telling his disciples that, if the demands of charity take them away from their time of prayer, they are not the less acceptable to God. The apostolic life is like a journey in the desert – you may have to travel for quite a while on what is in the camel's hump – but when the time of rest at the oasis comes, one drinks long and deep at the well to recharge the batteries and prepare for the next journey. Like many apostolic people, I have found that there is a very special sweetness in prayer after a period of apostolic activity for one moves from preaching or whatever into deep stillness and consolation. It is not a question of work *or* prayer but of a life in which the two are inexorably welded together, prayer giving one power to serve and generous foot-washing leading to sweetness at rest in the presence of God. It is in this way that St Paul's amazing admonition to pray always can literally be obeyed, and there comes a time when one dares to say with him, 'I live now, not I but Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2:20).

Discipleship as Listening

Eli said to Samuel: 'Go and lie down, and if someone calls say, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."' So Samuel went and lay down in his place. (1 Sam. 3:9)

The key to discipleship is listening and if we are to take seriously the call to follow Christ we must listen to what he is asking of us. Men and women in religious life commonly take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and those of us who are not thus committed are tempted to breathe a sigh of relief and thank our lucky stars that we are not tied down. If we reflect upon it, however, there is a sense in which all Christians are bound with Hosea's leading reins of love:

I led them with reins of kindness,
with leading strings of love.

Hos. 11:4

Christ demands quite clearly of all of us that we share our wealth with our brothers, that we be chaste of heart and that we listen to his voice. Again and again in the gospels he calls us to listen: 'I am the way, the truth and the life'; 'I am the Bread of Life'; 'He who hears me hears the Father'; 'Come to me all you who are heavily laden and I will give you rest.'

How then can we be so obtuse as to think that it is only the professed religious who are bound by vows of obedience – for the word obedience comes from the root *audire* – to hear, and obedience in its essence is listening. How then should lay Christians listen to the word of God and in particular, how should those of us involved in caring cash out our 'obedience'? I would suggest six areas of life in which we must be particularly sensitive, tuned in to hear what God is asking of us. The first of these (and I do not set them in any order of importance) is scripture. There are many people for whom daily