

We acknowledge with the prophets the depth of human restlessness, realizing it can be quelled only by a fuller openness to the Lord.

Give Comfort To My People: Praying In the Spirit

By RICHARD J. HAUSER

I REMEMBER WHEN I LEARNED to pray. I was teaching as a Jesuit scholastic at a mission in South Dakota. Our life was very difficult. Our regular daily order included rising at 5:00 A.M. and retiring after the students were asleep around midnight. We were expected to do an hour of meditation before 6:30 Mass in the mission church. Eventually sheer physical exhaustion drove me to begin sleeping late, getting up only in time for Mass. Daily meditation had always been presented to me as essential for living the Jesuit life, so I experienced continual guilt for skipping it.

Every evening, however, after the students had quieted down in the dorms, I'd walk down the highway under the stars, often for over an hour. I recall being discouraged and lonely and pouring out my heart to God. I also recall returning from these walks peaceful, feeling close to Christ and wondering how I could survive without these walks. My conscience continued to bother me for omitting daily meditation, but one night I had a startling realization: I was not skipping daily meditation, I was doing it at night! I was walking down that highway each night to be with the Lord—not to fulfill a religious obligation. I had discovered a rhythm of being totally open to and comforted by God. I had learned to pray.

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My nightly mission walks had uncovered my own almost desperate need for a fuller coming of the Lord into my life. I was praying, actually, in the spirit of Advent, which has become my favorite liturgical season. Advent, from the Latin *adventus*, "coming," commemorates the threefold coming of the Lord to the human family: the historical coming of Jesus in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, the final coming of the Son of Man at the end of the world, the daily coming of Christ to the hearts of believers. The third, the daily coming, is the most central to the season—and the most neglected. We energetically celebrate the historical coming of Immanuel (God-with-us), and we all but ignore the implications of that coming, his abiding with us.

In this liturgical season the church invites us to pierce through the levels of our habitual consciousness and discover those areas where Christ does not yet abide. Having exposed our emptiness, we are invited to pray the Advent prayer, *Maranatha*, "Come, Lord Jesus!" The spiritual discipline *par excellence* for Advent is thus the prayer of longing, longing for the fuller coming and comfort of the Messiah to the human family, a longing classically expressed by the Hebrew prophets of old, "Rouse up your might and come!" We acknowledge with the prophets the depth of human restlessness, realizing it can be quelled only by a fuller openness

ART: MICHAEL TUNNEY, S.J.

to the Lord, which occurs only through a fuller opening to God's Spirit. So my Advent observance now centers around attentiveness to the voice of the Spirit.

Regularly in Advent I receive requests to give talks on prayer in preparation for Christmas. Usually I'm told that the group would like some practical methods for improving the quality of their prayer. I am uncomfortable with the assumptions behind these requests. My own experience tells me that praying well involves more than the conscientious use of methods—I'd been doing that for years before my breakthrough at the mission. My experience tells me that prayer happens best when we find a time and place that enable us to be in touch with God's Spirit—and with our own deepest selves. At that moment God's Spirit joins our spirit, and we truly pray from our hearts. In this context Paul's remarks about God's Spirit aiding our prayer make great sense: "The Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness. For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words, and God who knows everything in our hearts knows perfectly well what he means, and that the pleas of the saints expressed by the Spirit are according to the mind of God" (Rom. 8:26-27).

The Second Vatican Council called us to a renewed appreciation of the role of the Holy Spirit within the church and within spirituality. Chapter One of the "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church" expresses this eloquently:

The Spirit dwells in the church and in the hearts of the faithful as in a temple (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19). In them he prays and bears witness to the fact that they are adopted sons (cf. Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:15-16, 26). The Spirit guides the church into the fullness of truth (cf. Jn. 16:13) and gives her a unity of fellowship and service. He furnishes and directs her with various gifts, both hierarchical and charismatic, and adorns her with the fruits of his grace (cf. Eph. 4:11-12; 1 Cor. 12:4; Gal. 5:22).

In order that we may be unceasingly renewed in him [Jesus] (cf. Eph. 4:23), he has shared with us his Spirit who, existing as one and the same being in the head and in the members, vivifies, unifies, and moves the whole body.

Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Lord and Giver of Life* (1986) reflects Vatican II's emphasis on the centrality of the

Spirit in Christian life. The Pope succinctly summarizes the connection between the redemption of Jesus and our sanctification by the Holy Spirit: "The redemption accomplished by the Son in the dimensions of the earthly history of humanity—accomplished in the 'departure' through the cross and resurrection—is at the same time, in its entire salvific power, transmitted to the Holy Spirit: the one who 'will take what is mine'" (No. 22).

The Pope reminds us that we adequately understand the Christian vocation only when we understand the role of the Holy Spirit: The entire effect of the redemption is brought about by the Holy Spirit. Post-Vatican II Christians are challenged to renew their understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit—an understanding all but lost before the council—and then to rethink their approach to every spiritual discipline, including personal prayer.

The Spirit and the Self.

Treatment of the role of the Spirit within ourselves must begin with the Last Supper discourse in John's Gospel. Jesus is comforting his disciples, having told them of his imminent departure: "But now I am going to the one who sent me, and not one of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' But because I told you this, grief has filled your hearts. But I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you" (Jn. 16:5-7).

Jesus explains why it is better for his followers that he goes: The Spirit he sends will take his place, guiding and strengthening them in their mission. Indeed this union with himself through the Spirit is the condition for apostolic effectiveness. The Gospel could not be more clear: "Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:4-5).

Jesus' prediction is fulfilled at Pentecost, when the Spirit descends on the community. The Acts of the Apostles gives witness to the working of the Spirit in the apostolic church. Note the difference in the disciples before and after the coming of the Spirit.

Among New Testament writings, the letters of Paul are also a most eloquent witness to this power of the Spirit—a power he received only after his conversion to Christ at Damascus. For Paul, belief in Jesus, with the subsequent infu-

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sion of the life of the Spirit, is a new principle of life, a new creation. This principle of life infuses the Christian community forming one body, the Body of Christ, with every member united and animated by the same Spirit: "The body is one and has many members, but all the members, many though they are, are one body, and so it is with Christ. It was in one Spirit that all of us, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, were baptized into one body. All of us have been given to drink of the one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:12-14).

What can we Christians expect from this presence of the Spirit? The answer presupposes three modes of activity flowing from the three dimensions of our being—physical, psychological and spiritual. One may imagine three concentric circles. The center is the spirit, the middle is the mind, the outer is the body. Every human activity engages all three levels. Our physical and psychological activities are obvious to all, but what are our spiritual activities? The spiritual level is the level of our freedom, our freedom to *respond* to the Spirit or not to respond. The Holy Spirit joins our human spirit, *initiating* within us the desire for goodness—without the Spirit's presence we would not even have the desire. Responding to the Spirit then transforms the other levels of our being, the physical and the psychological. The Spirit is the principle for *all* Christian life. Traditionally this indwelling of the Spirit has been called sanctifying grace. Personal prayer—like every spiritual activity—is a response to the Spirit.

Unfortunately the Vatican II theological renewal concerning the Holy Spirit still remains contrary to popular beliefs. Many of us live with a different model of the self. I call it the Western model, because it is the model I recognize as dominating the approach to God in myself and in my brothers and sisters in the Western hemisphere. In this model God is solely transcendent—in heaven—and so not dwelling within the self through the Spirit. Since God is in heaven, God cannot be the initiator of good actions. Though the Western model duly acknowledges that we are made to know, love and serve God in this life and so be happy in the next, it gives God no role in these actions until after they are performed. Then it grants that God rewards us with grace in this life and heaven in the next. But in the Western model *we are the initiators* of our own good deeds—including personal prayer—so we never truly understand the inner dynamics of prayer. In this model sanctifying grace is often erroneously understood as the treasury of merit stored in heaven, earned by good works.

The Spirit and Personal Prayer.

All this has practical implications for how we pray. We are called to live and to pray within the scriptural model of the self—not the Western model. For me prayer is simply the movement of the heart toward God under the influence of the Holy Spirit. It is a movement of the heart: no heart movement, no prayer. It cannot be identified either with words we say or thoughts we think. Indeed, prayer need

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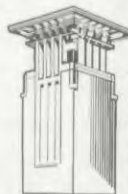


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not be accompanied by words or by thoughts. In Christian tradition the deepest prayer transcends both. And the movement can occur only when we are under the influence of the Holy Spirit. We have seen that the Spirit abides with us as a permanent indwelling gift of God. Though the Spirit, or sanctifying grace, is always present, we are not always in touch with that presence. But in prayer we set time aside to allow God's Spirit to join our spirit and to raise our hearts to God.

And in prayer the movement of the heart under the influence of the Spirit is ultimately toward God—toward the Father and toward Jesus. Just as Christian theology sees the Spirit as the bond of union between the Father and the Son in the Trinity, so the Spirit is our bond of union with the Father and Jesus. Note that we do not really pray *to* Mary and the saints; more accurately we go to them to pray *with* them to the Father and Jesus. In the communion of saints the Spirit unites us with Mary and the saints. And we on earth are united with them as they now are in heaven. In heaven they exist in continual movement of love and praise to the Father and Jesus; as such they can be privileged intercessors for us. With them we move toward communion with the Father and Jesus, since the deepest yearnings of our hearts are also toward the Father and Jesus. It's impossible to imagine Mary not wanting to unite us more deeply to her son and to our Father.

And Christians must pray, for in prayer we experience our deepest identity. Often we erroneously assume that we pray simply to seek specific favors from God. Deeper reflection reveals, however, that what we are really seeking is a confirmation of God's love for us. Though we may be led to prayer to seek specific favors, as we continue praying we eventually realize our deepest need is for God's presence and support; the Spirit has transformed our initial desires. The process is not unlike Jesus' transformation in the Garden of Gethsemane. Initially he begins by seeking to have the chalice of suffering removed, but he concludes by yielding to God's presence and energized to do God's will. I believe I experienced this same type of surrender during my nightly walks at the mission. I wait expectantly for a similar renewal each Advent.

The "trick" to praying well is discovering the conditions that best facilitate the movement of the Spirit. The time, place and setting for prayer are important. We choose the best available time, place and setting. For me at the mission, this was late at night walking down a highway, and definitely not early in the morning when I was half-asleep. I am pre-

senting the following conditions and methods as the ones that regularly best facilitate my own daily response to the Spirit in personal prayer. Each person's conditions and methods will be distinctive, related to personality and schedule.

First, the *time*. As it happens, I now do manage to pray early. After rising, showering and shaving, I light a candle before my prayer wall. I spend 60 to 90 minutes in the following spiritual disciplines. After getting coffee, I begin by writing in my journal; then, putting the coffee aside, I move to the morning office; finally, I go to personal prayer for the last 20 to 30 minutes. I never rush, spending as much time journaling as needed. The journaling clears my head and allows me to process what has built up in my psyche, matter that could emerge as distractions in personal prayer. Often journaling provides the topic for the subsequent prayer.

Next, the *place*. I pray in my own room—which doubles as a bedroom—in a chair next to a large window with an eastward exposure overlooking a secluded garden; the chair faces my prayer wall. It is upholstered and comfortable but supports me firmly in an upright position. Alongside the chair on a side table I place all the materials I need: my journal, a Bible, the daily office, a lectionary, meditation books related to the liturgical season. I love this room. It is away from my offices; the window, open in warm weather, gives direct access to the sights and sounds of the garden and to the warmth and light of the rising sun. My prayer wall is hung with favorite icons, prints and crucifixes gathered over the years, which I rearrange for different liturgical seasons and feasts. I also have music tapes that I occasionally use as background. The physical setting—the time, place, furniture arrangement—is key. The regular rhythm of entering this environment at this time each day not only prepares the conditions for facilitating the Spirit but often occasions immediate communion with the Lord. Given the desire for communion with God, praying can be simple. Just find the right time and place and go there regularly.

Use of prayer methods may also help or hinder the movement of the Spirit. Most of us pray using the method of *lectio* prayer. In this prayer we choose an aspect of God's word to focus our attention, and then we wait, listen and respond to the word of God—under the influence of the Spirit. This method is based on the conviction that God is present and can speak to us through the word. But the "word of God" has multifold meanings. God is present in the *scriptural*

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word; traditionally most have found the scriptural word has been the most helpful starting point. God is also present in the *created word*; some find focusing on God's presence in creation—the beauty of nature—a more effective beginning. God is also present in the *existential word*; many find focusing on God's presence in events and people of their lives the most effective beginning. But any aspect of creation or embodiment of creation—images, poetry, music—is a word of God and possible starting point for prayer, since God is present in all aspects of reality sustaining them in existence and using them to bring us into communion: "Creation proclaims the glory of God."

The Christian tradition affirms a wonderful truth: By focusing on the word of God we can be led by the Spirit to the highest levels of communion with God. This tradition, enshrined in Benedictine spirituality, describes internal transformation as moving from thinking (*meditatio*) about God's presence in the word, to praying (*oratio*) to God about our reactions to this presence, to simply resting (*contemplatio*) in God's presence without either thinking about God or even consciously praying to God. Guigo II, a 12th-century Carthusian abbot, gives in his *Ladder of Monks (Scala Claustralium)* the classic expression of the internal dynamic of this prayer:

You can see...how these degrees are joined to each other. One precedes the other, not only in the order of time but of causality. Reading (*lectio*) comes first, and is, as it were, the foundation; it provides the subject matter we must use for meditation. Meditation (*meditatio*) considers more carefully what is to be sought after; it digs, as it were, for treasure which it finds and reveals, but since it is not in meditation's power to seize upon the treasure, it directs us to prayer. Prayer (*oratio*) lifts itself up to God with all its strength, and begs for the treasure it longs for, which is the sweetness of contemplation. Contemplation (*contemplatio*) when it comes rewards the labors of the other three; it inebriates the thirsting soul with the dew of heavenly sweetness. Reading is an exercise of the outward senses; meditation is concerned with the inward understanding; prayer is concerned with desire; contemplation outstrips every faculty.

The goal of the process is contemplation, which "outstrips every faculty" and rests in communion with God. Our activity recedes; God's increases: God holds us to God's self with little or no effort on our part.

For me two other methods of prayer complement *lectio* prayer. Centering prayer is based on the truth of God's presence in the *center* of our being, beyond the level of thoughts and desires. It presumes the scriptural model of the self. I find it most helpful when the Spirit brings me to the contemplation mode of *lectio* prayer. After I have reached a level of interior quiet I experience no need to verbalize thoughts and desires to God and am drawn by the

An End Not an End

*When is an end not an end?
I used to wonder.*

*Today I think:
when not given cachet:
an end, not recognized as an end,
can never end.*

*I dreamed of a friend
whose funeral I attended.*

*"I'm so glad to see you," I said,
"I thought you were dead."*

*He smiled his old mischievous smile.
"Whatever gave you that idea,"
he said.*

*Like the eyes that take on
the color of a garment worn
that day;
like the judge, always
the last word in a trial,
some tribes recognize
that it is the interpreter that gives
a dream its truth,
and dreams, in effect,
become their interpretation.*

*When is the end not an end?
I ask myself,
and tell myself:
like now, like here*

*when I look for him everywhere
and though I cannot find him,*

know he is there.

E. B. DE VITO

Spirit simply to rest in the Lord. To symbolize my intention I choose a favorite appellation for God, such as, "Father," "Abba, Father," "Jesus," "Lord," repeating my prayer word only when distractions arise. The rest of the time I simply sit in faith before the Lord. The method, taken from the 14th-century English classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*, is more useful for those who have been praying regularly. In this method the Spirit holds us in communion with God without the mediation of thoughts and desires.

The assumptions and dynamics of mantra prayer are similar to those of centering prayer. In mantra prayer we also respond to God directly, unmediated by reflections on God's word. Having reached a level of interior quiet, we sustain our prayer not by a prayer word but by a mantra. Most mantras have four phrases; we slowly repeat the mantra, coordinating its four phrases (indicated below by asterisks) with our inhaling and exhaling (most, though not all, authors suggest coordination with breathing). The desert fathers preferred: "O God * come to my assistance * O Lord * make haste to help me." The most famous mantra in the Christian tradition, however, is the Jesus Prayer of the fifth-century Greek Fathers: "Lord Jesus Christ * Son of God * have mercy on me * a sinner." I frequently recast scriptural passages into mantra form. Among my favorites: "The Lord * is my shepherd * there is nothing * I shall want"; "You are my servant * whom I have chosen * my beloved * with whom I am pleased"; "I am the vine * you are the branches

* without me * you can do nothing." Mantra prayer enters the Christian tradition formally in the fifth century in the *Conferences* of John Cassian.

When thoughts arise in centering or mantra prayer, the practical advice for handling them is simple: Resist no thought, react to no thought, retain no thought. Simply return to the prayer word or mantra. Thoughts even have a positive quality to them, because as we let them pass we are evacuating from our psyches obstacles to the contemplative communion with God. They are actually part of the purification process. Handled well, they move us toward interior silence, "which outstrips every faculty."

The Best Method of Prayer?

There is no best way to pray. Whatever works is best for us. Since the goal of all prayer methods is communion with God, and since only the Spirit can bring about this communion, our role is to discover the conditions that facilitate the movement of the Spirit. Communion remains a gift. I once believed—erroneously—that it was my conscientious use of a particular method that guaranteed good results in prayer. Through trial and error we discover how best to be open to God. Robert Frost's poem "Not All There" catches the challenge for praying well:

*I turned to speak to God
About the world's despair;
But to make bad matters worse
I found God wasn't there.*

*God turned to speak to me
(Don't anybody laugh);
God found I wasn't there—
At least not over half.*

The following are some additional reflections on what helps me "be there" in prayer. I am not presenting them as ways everyone should pray.

The starting point for prayer is usually my life, the existential word of God as I am experiencing it. I have had little luck—and in the past wasted much time—forcing myself to reflect on meditations written by others, unrelated to my daily life. I believe God continually manifests God's self in all creation and history—and in my life—through the Spirit. I choose some aspect of God's word from my previous day, a person or event. I bring the matter to mind and begin focusing my attention upon it. I put distractions aside as they occur and attempt to keep my mind gently on God's word. I *wait* in God's presence, *listen* to God's speaking through the word in my heart and *respond* in any way the Spirit moves. The Spirit directs our attention to the word (*lectio*); the Spirit transforms our minds, prompting suitable thoughts about the word (*meditatio*); the Spirit transforms our wills, prompting suitable desires and affections about the word (*oratio*); the Spirit leads us to rest in God's presence beyond thoughts and desires (*contemplatio*). I believe that *listening to God* is a better metaphor for the prayer process than the traditional

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expression, *speaking to God*. We speak only in response to the Spirit and only after we have listened.

But frequently, after lighting my candle, settling into my prayer chair, sipping my coffee and journaling, I find myself already held to God by God with no further effort needed on my part, so I stop journaling. I am already centered; no method is needed. I have developed a facility for being drawn by the Spirit into communion by the regularity of being present to God each morning at this time and in this place. The setting has not only prepared me for praying but has actually itself occasioned it. Perhaps my journal recordings have brought to mind some blessing, some word of God, from the previous day. The blessing becomes the occasion, the sacrament, for awakening consciousness of God and for resting gratefully in the presence of God. The Spirit moves me from gratitude to communion and contemplation. All I know is that I have no desire either to reflect upon or pray over the blessing. Or perhaps the recordings have recalled a need. The need then becomes the occasion for awakening consciousness of dependence on God and resting in silent acknowledgment of my helplessness without God: "Be still and know that I am God." At this point I often use mantra prayer and then centering prayer to sustain my attention.

Occasionally my attention is caught unexpectedly by some aspect of the garden outside my window. I see the sun rising through the trees, I hear a song of a bird or rustle of leaves, I smell the fragrance of the garden and feel the wind on my face. I then have no desire to continue reflecting or praying. I find myself held by God to God; I am centered. Nature has become the sacrament occasioning communion with God and contemplation. Again mantra prayer or centering prayer may help me sustain attention.

Frequently also my attention is caught by one of the icons or prints on my prayer wall. My favorite images include these: the Vatican Museum's fourth-century sculpture of the Good Shepherd, the Vladimir Madonna, Fra Angelico's "Annunciation." I also rotate favorite works of art relating to the current liturgical season; I believe the Spirit offers graces to help savor the season. Each season finds me anticipating and responding anew to my favorite art works: for Christmas, Giorgione's "Adoration of the Shepherds"; for Lent, Perugino's "Crucifixion"; for Easter, Fra Angelico's "Noli Me Tangere." During Advent, Edward Hicks's "Peaceable Kingdom" seems best to evoke my

yearning for a fuller coming of the Lord to the human family—and to my life. I find myself held by God to God through these images, often with no desire to think about them; I am centered. The images have become sacramentals occasioning communion with God and contemplation. Again I may move from this *lectio* prayer on the word of God to mantra prayer to centering prayer.

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The Coming of Immanuel.

We may arrive at Advent preoccupied and discouraged by the events of our year. But the prophet Isaiah's words hearten us: "Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem." We dare to hope again for a better life and a better world through a fuller opening to God's presence. And in prayer we dare to pray for an actual experience of this presence. Despite our preoccupations we can always pray, for we have been given the Spirit to help us in our weakness. I think Paul had his own tumultuous life in mind—and perhaps also Jesus' experience in

Gethsemane—when he wrote to the community in Rome, a community experiencing persecution and even death for their faith in Christ: "The Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness. For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words, and God who knows everything in our hearts knows perfectly well what he means, and that the pleas of the saints expressed by the Spirit are according to the mind of God" (Rom. 8:26-27).

In Advent we seek to experience again the truth of Augustine's famous dictum, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee." And sometimes in the stillness of our prayer we are touched in the center of our being and taken out of time and beyond the ability of words to explain. God holds us to God's self. It is the experience of T. S. Eliot's "still point of the turning world" in "Burnt Norton":

*Neither movement from nor towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point,
the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.
I can only say, **there** we have been: but I cannot say
where.
And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place
it in time.*

Immanuel has come!

