

# PRAYER IN THE LIFE OF THE PRIEST

• Roch Kereszty •

“Once he realizes that God has decided from all eternity to grant certain graces to certain people at the intercession of their priest, he may have more incentive not to get tired of praying for his faithful. God loves the prayer of the shepherd for his sheep.”



## *1. The vocation of the ministerial priest*

In order to describe the role of prayer in the life of a Catholic priest, we need to recall first his unique vocation. Unlike the priests in pagan religions and even in the Old Testament, he is not a priest in his own right. In the New Testament the only Priest is Jesus Christ. Moreover, Jesus is not only Priest but also King and Prophet; the ministerial priest, however, only participates in these three offices of Christ. Finally, we need to clarify that here we speak only about the ministerial priesthood whose task is to actualize the royal and prophetic priesthood of all the members of the Church. Just like the mission of Jesus Christ, the role of the ministerial priest is defined by this threefold office. It is not a job, nor is it simply a sacred function. While every priest needs—almost daily—some time away from priestly activities in order to relax and replenish his energies, he can never take a vacation from his priesthood just as it is beyond his power to divest himself of his own identity. Catholics know that

even a laicized priest remains a priest “ontologically” and he can be saved only as a faithful or repentant priest.

St. Paul condenses his priestly vocation into one complex sentence as he explains the grace given to him by God “to be a minister (*leitourgos*) of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in performing the priestly ministry (*hierourgounta*) of the Gospel of God so that the offering up (*prosphora*) of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:16).<sup>1</sup> The priesthood of all the Christians is to offer their “own bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, their spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1). Paul’s vocation, on the other hand, and in some way every ministerial priest’s is to actualize this self-offering of the Christian people, their spiritual worship, by gathering them into one body (shepherding), enkindling their faith by the word of the Gospel (prophetic office), and uniting their gift of self to the one perfect sacrifice of Christ (priesthood in the strict sense: sacramental ministry).

Even from this simple outline appears the artificiality of any opposition between the two contemporary and competing ideals of the priest, the “priest who celebrates life” and the “priest who celebrates the sacraments.” The ministerial priest recruits and receives people from the world, introduces them to the sacraments, and especially to a participation in the Eucharist. Any fruitful celebration of the Eucharist, however, sends us into the world “to love and serve the Lord as lions breathing fire” in the words of St. John Chrysostom. The Eucharist is the source of loving and serving God in people with the very love of Christ. If a priest wants to celebrate only life, it will degenerate into an illusory “feel good” routine or into social service which should only be a part of his work. In fact the work of a social-activist priest could often be more professionally done by a competent layperson. But if a priest, on the other hand, wants to be only a sacramental minister, he ignores the dynamism of the sacramental grace of ordination which has been given to him so that, by his example, teaching, and actions, he would inspire his people to offer in the Eucharist their bodies, their will, and their actions in such a way as to influence and shape their daily lives.

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<sup>1</sup>Vatican II applies Paul’s understanding of his own apostolic mission to that of the ministerial priests in *PO* 3, 2.

## *2. Response to the call*

Unlike the priesthood of the Old Testament which was the birthright of the sons of the house of Aaron, the prophet-priests of the New Testament, like the prophets in the Old, are individually chosen and personally called by God. Paul describes his apostolic vocation with the words of the prophetic call of Jeremiah: God set him apart from his mother's womb and called him through his grace.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of how the call reaches the person, whether awakened by another priest, a parent, or friend, it will always penetrate the inmost depths of his soul and surface in his consciousness in the form of a question, a desire, a frightening burden, a sweet dream, or even an unshakeable certainty. Already at this point, the one who has become aware of the call should respond with prayer. If he ignores it and tries to mute it by throwing himself into the deafening noise of distractions or burying himself in work, God may still pursue him just as he tracked down Jonah. After a while, however, He may give up the chase. Even a loud protest to God is better than ignoring the invitation. If you begin to fight God, enumerating all the obvious reasons why you should not become a priest or religious, God will fight you back and you should allow him to overcome your resistance. The most insidious way of resisting God is to assure him that you sincerely want to obey his will whatever it might be, but you insist that his call should be "clear and unambiguous." You remind God of Paul's vocation: he was knocked down to the ground by a blinding light. But God rarely obeys our whims and almost always surprises us. He spoke to Elijah in a gentle breeze and very often the loud noise of our cravings makes us deaf to his gentle whispering.

As we surrender to the call, we should accept the possibility that we are mistaken about it. But it will never be clarified unless we develop a regular prayer life including frequent or even daily participation in the Eucharist, confession, and spiritual reading. Also of real importance is the selection of a capable spiritual director. The quality of our prayers in this preparatory stage will greatly influence our later priestly life and activities. Even at this point God sees us connected with all those who will later be entrusted to our care. Our fight against temptations as well as a generous renunciation of all that

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. Gal 1:15 and Jer 1:5.

could hinder our vocation will have an impact on many other people. We never fight only for ourselves and we never fight alone. Our Virgin Mother Mary and the saints we invoke are all helping us with their prayers.

The story of a genuine vocation always includes, sooner or later, an “end of the rope” experience. This is the realization that I simply cannot live up to my call, that for me it is an utter impossibility. Moses cannot go to Pharaoh because he is stuttering, Jeremiah complains that he is a young boy and cannot speak, Isaiah is struck with deadly fear on account of his sins, and Paul complains about the thorn in his flesh. Peter wants to leave Jesus because the miraculous catch of fish reveals to him the divine holiness of Jesus. St. Ignatius of Loyola is tempted to commit suicide in the cave of Manresa because of his sins. Such near despair moments are designed in God’s providence to become moments of grace, the beginning of a new stage in our way to the ministry. If we persevere in prayer, we will discover with St. Paul that “God’s grace is sufficient for me” and we may even “boast most gladly of” our “weaknesses that the power of Christ may dwell in” us (2 Cor 12:7–9).

### 3. *Personal prayer*

The realization of our total unworthiness and of the almighty power of God’s forgiving and transforming grace is essential for the right attitude before and after priestly ordination. If our prayer life does not keep up with what is happening, we can hardly avoid falling into the trap of one of two temptations. One is to identify ourselves with the dignity of the priesthood in such a way that we think we are indeed the *alter Christus* in our puny sinful person, and therefore we lay claim on the respect that people owe to Christ himself. St. Bernard compares such clergymen to the foolish horse which thinks that the veneration shown to the prelate on its back is actually rendered to the horse itself. Unfortunately, in order to avoid this temptation many well-meaning clergymen seem to have fallen into the opposite trap after Vatican II. They strove eagerly to get rid of all the “mystique” of the priesthood since *Lumen gentium* famously declared that all baptized Christians have the same Christian dignity. Therefore they reduced their priesthood to carrying out certain (temporary) functions, and as soon as they finished the sacramental rite, they would humbly and gladly disappear in the Christian

community which, in their mind, ought to become more and more self-directed. As a result of this misunderstanding, the post-conciliar Church in some places came very close to the democratic assembly of a Protestant church.

The Catholic truth on the priesthood is opposed to both deviations. Paul insists: “We don’t preach ourselves but Jesus Christ the Lord and ourselves as your servants (or slaves) for the sake of Christ” (2 Cor 4:5). Our dignity consists in this twofold service: the servants of Christ and the servants of the Christian people. Paul proudly claims to be “*doulos Iesou Christou—servant or slave of Jesus Christ.*” Thus, we represent Jesus Christ to the extent that we become his servants. We need to develop a boundless respect for the charism of our priesthood but also the awareness that we are carrying this great treasure in fragile clay vessels and that we should not steal it for our own possession. A saintly spiritual director once gave this helpful advice: “every day you should kneel down before your priesthood.”

If already a candidate for the priesthood should consider himself connected in his prayers to all his future faithful, how much more should the ordained priest! If we read the beginnings of the letters of St. Paul, we see that he is constantly thinking of his own “children” in prayer. He always gives thanks to God for the graces they received and prays unceasingly for their progress and final perseverance. He can do all this because he is longing for them in the *splanchnois Christou Iesou*, literally, in the intestines or innards or heart of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:3). Since Jesus himself prayed to his Father that his disciples may share in the very love with which the Father loves Jesus and with which Jesus loves the disciples, we not only may but should ask for this grace. It is not presumptuous to do so; actually it would be a sign of a lack of faith if we did not dare to ask for it. God would provide the grace for us to love our people with the very love and very heart of Jesus Christ, provided that we do not want to “steal” it for ourselves by attributing this love to our own efforts.

If we truly share in Jesus’ love, our heart will be stretched wide enough to embrace all those God entrusts to our care. As Paul said: “Our heart is open wide” (2 Cor 6:11). This means that our people are invited to enter our hearts in order to find in them interest, empathy, help, and protection. If we experience indifference or aversion for someone entrusted to our care, we should beg

God to change our heart, and until that change happens, love that person at least in our actions.

#### *4. The Liturgy of the Hours and the Eucharist*

Every priest has the obligation to recite daily the Liturgy of the Hours either in common or privately. This requires an even more radical stretching of his love and interest since the Church prays with Christ for all humankind. Its largest part consists of the Psalms, which include the widest range of human emotions, expressing attitudes of humble worship, exuberant praise, acute guilt, deadly fear, a trusting or desperate cry for help, or exultant gratitude for being rescued from sin, illness, and death. Since Jesus has come to identify with every human being of all times, he has adopted the Psalms as his own prayer and includes in them, purified and uplifted, all the intentions of humankind. In reciting the Liturgy of the Hours, the priest and religious give voice to this universal prayer of the Church.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, we cannot feel the emotion of every Psalm whenever we pray, but with our will we can embrace all the intentions expressed in them.

Since the official Prayer of the Church centers on, and derives from, the Eucharist, its celebration should become also the center of the priest's personal prayer life. By offering the gifts of bread and wine, we intend to offer the whole Church, those who "take part in this offering," and "those who seek [God] with a sincere heart," along with all human work and the whole material universe. The Father does not reject our material offerings, nor the intentions expressed in them. Rather, he takes seriously our desire (inspired by his grace) to offer him a pleasing and perfect sacrifice of atonement, thanksgiving, and praise. As the gifts of bread and wine are changed into the sacrificed and risen humanity of his Son, so are our offerings of ourselves, our work, and all creation to be united with, and transformed into, the Son's perfect gift of self.

We often forget that the center of the Eucharist is not our own gift, but the sacrifice of Christ himself. And if we suffer from inadequacy as we try to embrace the personal dispositions of Christ

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<sup>3</sup>The clergy and members of most religious orders accept the obligation to pray the Liturgy of the Hours regularly, but every Christian is invited to share in it.

in his sacrifice, we can always ask for Mary's help. Being full of grace, she alone fully accepted and offered the sacrifice of her Son when she uttered her "Yes" at the Annunciation and again most especially at the foot of the Cross. Being given to us as our mother in the order of grace, she is anxious to help us in the celebration of the Eucharist.

### 5. Meditation

Without a developing personal prayer life our celebration of the Eucharist and our recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours may easily become a mindless routine or, at most, a tedious obligation. The growth of spiritual life demands some form of daily meditation in which, instead of one-sided talking to God, we begin to listen to him. There are many different approaches to a successful meditation. Each one of us should adopt a way that suits him best. Here I will present only some general guidelines.

*The goal of meditation* is to develop a sensitivity to God's presence. Even though most of the time we do not feel it, our faith teaches us that he is always there: not even a sparrow falls to the ground without his knowledge and will. He constantly sends us "coded messages," not through earth-shaking extra-ordinary interventions, but through the normal flow of events. But only a sensitive heart can decode the ciphers. In the words of Martin Buber: "All that happens, even the simple flow of events, is a call addressed to me. True faith begins when I become aware that everything that happens has a message for me . . . I suddenly realize that a presence confronts me."

*A prerequisite* for Christian meditation is the belief that God works "mighty deeds" in our own lives similar to those he worked in the history of Israel, Jesus, and the Church. What Christ did once in a visible way, he does every day spiritually in the life of the faithful. If we become convinced of this, we will read the Bible not merely as a source of information but as God's Word spoken to us here and now. This Word is an almighty word as much today as it was yesterday. If we have faith, this Word will raise us from the dead, restore our sight, or straighten our paralyzed limbs so that we may walk in his way.

*The process of meditation*

a) The most important preparation is *presence to ourselves*. We should not try to escape from ourselves by pumping up some lofty religious emotions. God waits for us inside our real selves, not in an imaginary idealized self. We should admit our poverty: all those feelings, resentments, envies, and cravings that we are ashamed of yet are part of ourselves. God hears only an honest prayer, the cry from the depth of our misery.

b) Once we have gotten in touch with our true selves, we can create some *silence* and *hunger* in our hearts. A story about one of the Desert Fathers may help here.

A young man came one day to an old spiritual father and asked him, "Father, teach me how to find God." The old man did not reply but started toward the river nearby. Surprised, the young man followed him in silence. When they arrived at the river bank, the old hermit grabbed the young man, dunked him, and held him under water until he almost drowned. "What did you desire most while you were under water?" asked the hermit after he had let the young man catch his breath. "Air, of course," he replied. "If you desire God so passionately as you were craving for air while you were under the water, you will find him," the old man said in conclusion.

If we have this desire for God, we should be confident: our desire of him is a sure sign that he wants to be found by us. We could not desire him if his grace were not already at work within us.

c) The next step is to *read* a passage from the Bible (or from a good spiritual book) *slowly* and *peacefully*, pondering, almost tasting, each word. I may also imagine a scene from the life of Jesus and identify myself with one of the characters: depending on my changing needs, sometimes I am the disciple whom Jesus encourages or reprimands, the sinful woman to whom he says, "I do not condemn you. Go and from now on do not sin," or the self-righteous Pharisee whom Jesus tries to shake out of his complacency. Let us allow the words of Jesus to sink in, to make an impact on our mind and heart. Sometimes we will find what we need immediately. Sometimes we will continue reading longer until some words seem applicable to our situation.

d) Then let us ask, "*Lord, what do you want me to do?*" For instance, if I am thinking about the words of Jesus, "Blessed are the peacemakers," I should examine what prevents me from being at

peace; what is the cause of my restlessness; what are those situations where my peace could influence others? Then I would ask what is the secret of Jesus' peace, how is it different from the peace of this world? How can it co-exist with struggle and suffering? I beg him with full trust to give me a share in his peace knowing that he inspired this request in me so that he might also grant it to me.

e) Finally, let us *thank God for what we received*—even if we feel that we did not receive anything. It is important that we meditate every day about twenty to thirty minutes regardless of our moods. We will see only later that it was worth the effort. Even if our heart and mind remained empty and dry during the meditation, we still may become sensitive to God's signals during the day. This means that we perceive a harsh criticism, a sincere smile, or a beautiful sunset as God's personal gifts to us. God remains quite unpredictable: he takes the initiative when he wants to. But without a personal struggle every day to keep our ears open, we may not be able to hear him when he decides to speak.

#### *When to meditate?*

It depends on individual needs. For some, the best time is in the early morning before the daily chores and duties have drained them of all energy. Some cannot keep their eyes open and their minds going at an early hour. For them the ideal time might be in the evening, when they are alone and at peace and still wide awake. The best way is to divide the time for meditation between evening and morning. We read the text once at night and think about it peacefully before we fall asleep. As we awake, we return to it in the morning. After such a conscious and subconscious preparation the words of Scripture will sink in much more effectively than after one cursory reading in the morning.

#### *Material for meditation*

God's Word that gives light and life is the Bible. So the Bible should be our most important spiritual reading, to which we return time and again; yet, at times other books of spirituality or lives of the saints help us make the words of the Bible come alive and speak to us more effectively than the Bible alone. Sometimes, when we do not have any particular question or problem, we may just use the readings of the Mass for the day or read through a whole book of the

Bible over a longer period of time by selecting a passage for each day. But if I have a specific problem or question (for instance, what is the meaning of this crisis I have to endure, or how could I pray better?), I will try to find those Bible passages that promise an answer to my question. Several Bible editions, such as the Jerusalem Bible, have a topical index that can help us find the texts we are looking for.

### 6. *Centering prayer?*

As dialogue with the Hindu and Buddhist forms of meditation multiplied in our age, a trend developed within Catholicism which regarded the work of the imagination and discursive reasoning suitable only for beginners. Those who found these methods unhelpful were encouraged to empty their minds of images and concepts and by the silent and slow repetition of a word to prepare themselves for sinking into a deeper level of consciousness, into “centering prayer” where they can find God present in their souls. The Trappist Fathers Thomas Keating and Basil Pennington,<sup>4</sup> as well as the Benedictine John Main,<sup>5</sup> find this kind of non-discursive prayer well attested in the patristic age and in the teachings of the great Spanish mystics Saints Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. The Catholic advocates of “Centering Prayer” make it very clear that the technique of emptying the mind while repeating slowly and silently a short word, a “mantra,” like love or Jesus, or *Marana-tha*, do not automatically produce the mystical experience but rather prepare themselves for God’s grace. The beneficial effects of centering prayer cannot be reasonably denied in some people. Nevertheless, St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross insist that “the prayer of quiet” (which the above-mentioned movement claims to revive) will be given by God to people at the time determined by God and God alone. Therefore the technique of sinking into a non-

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<sup>4</sup>See M. Basil Pennington, *Centering Prayer. Renewing an Ancient Christian Prayer Form* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), Thomas Keating, M. Basil Pennington, Thomas E. Clarke, *Finding Grace at the Center* (Still River: St. Bede Publications, 1978).

<sup>5</sup>*Christian Meditation. The Gethsemane Talks* (Tucson: Medio-Media, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 2001).

discursive consciousness can easily turn into an attempt to manipulate a deeper awareness of God's loving presence. God, however, does not respond to manipulation and thus, these meditators may be captivated simply by the depth of their own consciousness into which they withdraw for seeking an undisturbed peace of mind.

I have not studied Centering Prayer enough to provide an adequate evaluation. What I know can only be put in conditional sentences. The biblical criteria for discernment are clear: if a spiritual exercise produces good fruits, the fruits of the Spirit (love, humility, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control: Gal 5:22–23), then the Spirit of God is truly active in the prayer of that soul. But those who fall in love with Centering Prayer to the point of devaluing the Eucharist and other liturgical prayers, or lose interest in reflecting on the mysteries of Christ the man, his birth, life, passion, and resurrection, are deluded to do so only by their own consciousness rather than by the Holy Spirit. The human soul has an enormous hidden potential and its activation through Centering Prayer can charm the soul to become captivated by its own beauty and power. If, however, God's Spirit is truly active in the contemplation of certain people, these will be more eager to participate in the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours. As a result of their Centering Prayer, they will turn with greater desire to appropriating and tasting the biblical Word as the great contemplative saints of all times have done.

### 7. Adoration before the Blessed Sacrament

After a short eclipse resulting from a faulty interpretation of Vatican II, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament has made a powerful comeback.<sup>6</sup> Wherever it has been re-introduced in any significant way, it has produced abundant fruits. The prayer life of both pastors and flocks deepened, the parish community became prayerful and more united, priestly vocations budded forth. The objection that the worship of the Blessed Sacrament is a late medieval practice, replaced frequent communion and, therefore, that it was an unhealthy

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<sup>6</sup>This section on adoration has been adapted from my *Wedding Feast of the Lamb. Eucharistic Theology from a Historical, Biblical and Systematic Perspective* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, LTP, 2004), 225–29.

development must be seen for what it is: a dangerous half-truth. Adoration should not replace Holy Communion. On the other hand, without the practice of adoration outside the Mass, the celebration of the Eucharist and the reception of Holy Communion will easily become a hasty routine or degenerate into a self-celebration of the community.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the conciliar document on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, does not mention the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament outside of Mass. However, both the encyclical *Mysterium fidei* of Paul VI and the *Instruction of the Congregation of Rites* insist on its importance while explaining that worshipping the Eucharist outside of Mass has as “its origin and goal” the celebration of the Mass.<sup>8</sup> To assess the significance of adoration, we need to start from this fact: as long as the empirical signs of bread and wine remain, the Eucharistic Lord remains after the Mass in the same state in which he became present at consecration, the state of self-surrender to the Father and of nourishing food for us. He wants to remain with us in this form, which he acquired through his Crucifixion and eternalized through his glorious Resurrection throughout all time from the present until the consummation of history. The lasting presence of the Eucharistic Lord in our churches is the most eloquent form of God becoming “Emmanuel, that is, God with us.”<sup>9</sup>

One may object here that the risen Christ is already permanently present in those whom he nourishes in Holy Communion; one might also add that he is by nature omnipresent since he is God. However, according to the biblical evidence the risen Christ remains a true human being and, therefore, he cannot be ubiquitously present in his humanity.<sup>10</sup> He is indeed present in all those who believe in him and love him, but only to the extent that they allow

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<sup>7</sup>The situation of the Eastern-rite Catholic Churches and Orthodox churches is different. Their Eucharistic Liturgies are much longer than ours and there are more opportunities for adoration within the Eucharistic celebration itself.

<sup>8</sup>*Instructio de cultu mysterii eucharistici* (1967), 3e.

<sup>9</sup>Matthew emphasizes this mystery by using the literary device of inclusion. See 1:23 and 28:20.

<sup>10</sup>This issue was clarified in Catholic theology at the time of the Catholic-Lutheran controversy about the omnipresence of Christ’s humanity. Luther could affirm this omnipresence because of his somewhat monophysitic Christology, according to which the humanity of the risen Christ takes on the attributes of divinity.

him to be present through their love and faith. No Christian, however, was or will ever be substantially and totally Jesus Christ. It is only in the form of food (and drink, even though it is less convenient to preserve the consecrated wine) that he is permanently, totally, substantially present in his own crucified and risen humanity.<sup>11</sup>

The eucharistic presence of Christ fulfills and even surpasses the perennial desire of humankind for a sacred place in this universe, a point of permanent contact with the Sacred. The Eucharist is that concentrated divine presence which makes God's extended presence perceptible in all creation. It fulfills and surpasses as well the desire of Israel to have the *kabod Yahweh*, God's glory, dwell in their midst. God's glory can no longer abandon his eschatological Temple nor can he allow his Temple to be destroyed since he forever dwells in Jesus, the new Israel.

Of course, Jesus is not the "prisoner of the tabernacle": his being present there does not in any way impede his being present in other places and his working in human hearts. His becoming present through consecration changes the bread and wine, not him. To say that in addition to the tabernacle Jesus dwells also in heaven is misleading, since it implies that heaven is another place analogous to the space of the tabernacle. Heaven is God's transcendent realm that penetrates our world and is present in the most intense way where the risen Christ is present in his humanity, inseparably from the Father and the Holy Spirit and from his heavenly court of angels and saints. Thus, we should rather say that the tabernacle is heaven itself present among us. It is the mysterious ladder Jacob saw in his dream, a ladder that joins together heaven and earth. This ladder, however, is no material object but the person of the risen Christ who draws all to himself (Jn 1:51; 12:32).

Jesus spoke the profound truth when he said, "I am going away and I am coming to you" (Jn 14:28). His return to the Father, his transcendent form of glorified existence at the Father's right hand, enables him to adopt a new form of immanence among us. His exaltation results in a new descent, more lowly and more humble even than the Incarnation itself: the glory of the risen Christ reveals itself in a new depth of his humility, in a sense even surpassing his humiliation on the Cross.<sup>12</sup> In order to be completely available for

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<sup>11</sup>Cf. *Mysterium Eucharisticum*, n. 9.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. P. J. Eymard, *The Real Presence* (New York: Eymard League, 1938).

entering into us and feeding us, he lowers himself to the level of “things”; he “becomes” bread and wine, the only purpose of which is to provide nourishment and joy to human beings. The Son of God thus reveals his divine transcendence not in his splendid isolation from us, but in overcoming even the last remaining distance and separation between him and his creatures, while respecting our freedom and appealing to our love rather than coercing us by fear.

Ironically enough, some Catholic theologians insist that since Christ is present as food in the Eucharist, he should not be worshiped but eaten. Precisely because he has become as low and insignificant as ordinary food and drink for our sake, he deserves our worship in gratitude.

The tension between Christ’s humble form of appearance and his glorious existence in heaven determines our relationship to him in the Eucharist. Being present before him in the Holy Eucharist, we are in the presence of heaven itself: the joy of the risen Christ reduces the sense of our own and others’ sufferings and tragedies to size, giving us a foretaste of the ultimate triumph of love, and giving us insights and energy to comfort others. As the great worshiper of the Eucharistic Christ in the deserts of Africa, Charles de Foucauld, said: “How can I be sad when my beloved is already in the joy of his Father?” On the other hand, his humble form of presence reassures us of his ability and willingness to make our sufferings his own in a way that surpasses all understanding. From St. Paul who wanted to fill up in his own body what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ, through Origen and Gregory of Nazianzus to Pascal and even to our age, Christian mystics have been aware that the fullness of joy in the risen Christ coexists with his agony in his members up to the end of the world. This means that the risen Christ extends himself into the very being of the worshiper, prays and suffers through him, with him, and in him. In this way he turns our life and sufferings into a well-pleasing sacrifice to his Father. Thus, a mysterious exchange takes place between the worshiper and Christ. Christ makes our sufferings his own and gives us a share in his joy. The priest needs time, time spent in adoration before the Eucharist, in order to become more aware of the incredible mystery of this exchange. In such communing with Christ by desire, he will develop a much greater sensitivity for celebrating the Eucharist with awe and joy.

8. *Intercessory prayer*

In all his prayers, the priest appears before Christ charged with responsibility for all the faithful entrusted to his care. Paul tells his readers at the beginning of most of his letters that he gives thanks for them constantly and reminds them of his deep communion with them. His words apply to priests in a special way: "If we are afflicted, it is for your encouragement and salvation; if we are encouraged, it is for your encouragement which enables you to endure the same sufferings that we suffer" (1 Cor 1:6). So a priest's prayers, even those which center on his most personal problems, affect his faithful. When he celebrates the sacraments and sacramentals, the efficacy of his prayer does not depend on his personal holiness but on the almighty power of Jesus Christ and the faith of the Church. His intercessory prayers before or outside the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, on the other hand, depend on his personal standing before the Lord. Yet the grace to become a holy intercessor for his people is available to him in the sacrament of Holy Orders. Once he realizes that God has decided from all eternity to grant certain graces to certain people at the intercession of their priest, he may have more incentive not to get tired of praying for his faithful. God loves the prayer of the shepherd for his sheep. If his prayer for a conversion remains fruitless, he should remember the words of St. John Vianney to one of his fellow priests: "You prayed much for this man. But did you add fasting and some other mortifications?" If a priest cooperates with the grace of his ordination, Origen's allegory will be realized in him: he will be conformed to what he celebrates: his words, his life, and his person will be nourishing food for his people; or rather through his words, life, and person, Christ will nourish the faith and love of those whom the priest serves.

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At the decisive junctures of the Church's history renewal always started with prayer, the prayer of people who fully surrendered to God and allowed the life-giving energies of the Holy Spirit to work through them. After the Constantinian alliance of church and state watered down the general quality of Christian life, before ordination the great bishops Sts. Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Alexandria, and John Chrysostom all learned to

pray among the hermits and monks in the deserts of Egypt and Asia Minor. At the time of the barbarian invasions the most powerful evangelizing impulse came from a cave in Subiaco where St. Benedict of Nursia was immersed in prayer for many years. His monk priests and bishops Christianized the barbarian tribes of Europe in the following centuries. Bernard of Clairvaux was praying in a roadside chapel in Burgundy when he reached his final decision to enter the new monastery of Cistercium from where a renewed monasticism started to penetrate and fecundate the Church in the twelfth century. The return to evangelical poverty and charity in the thirteenth century was inspired by the words Francis heard in prayer before the crucifix in the crumbling old chapel of San Damiano in Assisi: “Francis, my church lies in ruins. Build it up.” At the time of the Protestant reformation the fireball that entered the heart of Philip of Neri as he was praying in the catacombs of San Callisto enkindled the conversion of the city of renaissance Rome. The struggles of Ignatius of Loyola in the cave of Manresa gave birth to the Book of Spiritual Exercises, which renewed and continues to renew hundreds of thousands of Christian lives throughout the world. The great impetus for renewal through the Second Vatican Council came—as Pope John XXIII himself testifies—from a sudden inspiration. Without assiduous prayer Paul VI could not have managed the great balancing act of implementing Church reform and resisting the destructive forces unleashed after the council. Through the media the many faces of John Paul II became a worldwide school of instruction in the different forms and in the development of prayer. The youthful trust and shining joy of the robust athlete of Christ, the tortured face of the shepherd suffering with Christ, the immobilized face and drooling lips of the dying old man of God, all these images intimated the source from where this extraordinary pope drew the energy to pour into millions of souls trust, courage, and the desire for an intimate communion with Christ.

An impressive number of young people whom some media like to call the “JP II generation” entered seminaries and novitiates in recent years. If the depth of their prayer life will match their enthusiasm, a new springtime for the Church is approaching. □

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