

THE MEANING OF PRAYER:

Last Sunday we read about Jesus teaching His disciples how to pray; In this series of our weekly Catechesis, we will read and reflect on the article of Fr John A. Hardon, S.J “The meaning of Prayer”.

How well do we communicate with the other world when we pray? Some explanation may be necessary for going into such an obvious subject as the meaning of prayer. Why not start with something more practical, like how to pray, or how to improve our prayer, and not begin with what must seem like needless concern with words. But I do not think it is wasted effort to talk about what so many people are not doing, or not doing as well as they could.

On all sides we hear it said that the basic problem in the world today is the fact that people are not praying, or not praying enough, and this is true. But it is not enough to say that we should pray and should encourage others to do the same.

We had better also know what prayer really means. Otherwise, as has happened to so many of us, without actually giving up prayer, we do not profit as much as we should from what is by all odds the most profitable enterprise in which any person can engage. There is nothing more profitable in which any human being can engage than to pray.

•Prayer is Conversation

We begin therefore by describing prayer in as simple a language as we, that is, I can. Prayer is conversation with the invisible world of God, the angels and the saints. We shall take each one of these terms in sequence, and first talk about prayer as conversation.

What is conversation, any conversation with anyone? Or from another viewpoint: What do we do when we engage someone in conversation? We do several things.

First, we begin to converse with somebody when we become aware of that person. Awareness, then, is the first condition for conversation. Suppose I am

just talking out loud to myself without realizing that I am being overheard. Is that conversation? Well, no. Why not? Because I was not aware of the other person's presence. If I was doing anything I was in conversation with myself. In fact, I think most people spend most of their waking hours in self-conversation, which is called, to give it a kind term, soliloquy.

Whereas, true conversation is always colloquy. It is not only awareness, but awareness of someone else's presence besides my own. And so many people go through life, I'm afraid, only dimly aware of anyone else's presence except their own. That is why self-centered people, even when they are apparently in conversation out loud with someone else, are most often really talking to themselves. Ever watch it? It is a spectacle. Real conversation begins when I become aware of another, with stress on the other, and not only of myself

- **Second.** Besides being aware of someone, and it has to be someone else, conversation means that I wish to share with that other person something of what I have. I wish to give of myself, of what is inside of me, or a part of me to that other person. There are thoughts in my mind that I also want them to have. There are sentiments in my heart, desires in my will and feelings in my soul, that I do not wish to possess alone.

So I enter into conversation in order to share. So true is this, that logically and psychologically I should not begin a conversation unless I have something that I wish to give someone else, which presumably that person does not yet have. That is why the highest act of charity among human beings is conversation, provided it is genuine and not spurious conversation.

We seldom reflect on the fact that the words convert, conversion and conversation all have the same fundamental meaning of redirection; a turning away from one thing, in this case self, and toward something else, in this case another person. True, sincere, deep, genuine, total conversation is more rare than we think.

- **Third.** There is still more to conversation, as the very word implies. When I begin to converse, I literally turn toward the one with whom I wish to speak. The movement of my body facing that person is only the external symbol of

what I should be doing inside of me. I am turning my spirit toward the one with whom I wish to talk. But as we know, it is quite possible to be physically facing someone without really conversing.

There is no conversation worthy of the name, unless I have thus inwardly, turned aside from self and directed myself to another. We seldom reflect on the fact that the words convert, conversion and conversation all have the same fundamental meaning of redirection; a turning away from one thing, in this case self, and toward something else, in this case another person.

True, sincere, deep, genuine, total conversation is more rare than we think. So often, I believe, we use other people, as we say, as sounding boards to listen to our own voice. They are just convenient to help us in what is still a continuous soliloquy. All real conversation, therefore, has this element of self-denial, or from another viewpoint, self-sacrifice where I turn from preoccupation with my own thoughts and desires and direct them toward someone else.

○ **Fourth.** What is my purpose when I hold a conversation? My purpose is, or should be to communicate. My intention is to bridge the gap that separates me from another person to unite myself with that other person, in a word, to communicate by transferring something of what is me to become part of what is he or she. We become united mainly by what we share of our own spirit with another person. Our Savior expressed for all time the deep meaning of conversation as communication when He told the Apostles how they were no longer strangers to Him but His friends (cf. Jn.15:15). Why? Because "I have shared with you what is in Me. I've told you what, before I spoke, was only on My mind. Now it's also on your minds. We have become united because part of Me is now part of you. You and I are united because I have communicated to you what before I spoke to you was only Mine." And then to emphasize the gravity of what He was doing He said it was the Father, who first in conversation with the Son, had shared the plenitude of the divine nature so that the Son in turn might share of that fullness with others who would mainly become His children because they would now receive what before belonged only to the Trinity. "You belong to Me," still Christ in paraphrase, "and I belong to you because we now have in common the secrets that were hidden with God from all eternity." We might, with reverence, re-describe the

Trinity as the eternal, infinite conversation among the three persons who constitute the Deity.

○ **Fifth and final.** Every conversation in some way or other employs a response from the one to whom I am speaking. Conversation is not merely talking to someone, it is talking with someone. Unless that person also says something to me I may be giving a speech or making an announcement, but I am hardly conversing.

The way that person responds to me is immaterial. It may be just a smile, or depending on what I said, a frown. It may be only an occasional word or two; it may be only a yes with different inflections. You know, of course, there are at least fifty ways of saying yes.

No matter what I say to that person, it must evoke something that he says to me or we are not, in the deepest sense of the word, in conversation. It takes two, at least, to converse, even when one may do most of the talking and the other, or others, do most of the listening. I should add, just for the record, that when I speak publicly, besides looking at the script I mainly watch the eyes and faces of my audience. I want to make sure that we are in conversation.

▪ **With the Invisible World** So much for the first level of our reflection. We said that prayer was first of all and fundamentally conversation. But this is no ordinary conversation, it is conversation with the invisible world. As conversation, prayer does not essentially differ from all other forms of colloquial discourse. But prayer is no ordinary conversation. It is conversation with the invisible world whose existence we can partially reason to and then only quite dimly, but whose reality and grandeur we can fully know only by faith.

Why call this world invisible?

Because it is known only with the eyes of the mind. It is not only not visible to the eyes of the body, but also not audible with bodily ears or tangible with bodily hands or palatable with bodily senses. And sadly, how tragically, some people suppose that because it is not sensibly perceptible therefore it is not real.

It is a world of faith that really exists and as St. Paul tells us is actually more real than the mountains, rivers and seas. It is more important than even the most important people we could ever meet on earth who might give us, if they would, a personal interview the memory of which we would treasure for the rest of our days.

What communication has been going on among the three divine Persons from endless ages before the world began! What a conversation they have been having long before any creature existed, or any human being even had a thought. You might again with reverence say that when we pray to God we are breaking in on the conversation among the persons of the Trinity.

Prayer depends on the liveliness of our faith. Without faith there is no prayer. Either I believe that there is more to reality than the sun, moon and stars or more than the people I meet on the street or in the privacy of my home, or I shall not pray. I shall limit my conversation to the visible world and that is not prayer. Those who believe, pray; those who do not believe, do not pray. Those who believe much, pray much; those who believe little, pray little. Those who believe deeply, pray deeply; those who believe weakly, pray weakly. We pray as we believe, neither more nor less. Faith is the condition for prayer. It is also the measure and the norm of the quality and quantity of our prayer.

The Angels

The angels are providential intermediaries between God, whose vision they already enjoy, and mankind, whom they are entrusted to lead to the vision not yet attained. We, therefore, have not only the privilege but the duty to talk with the angels in easy, intimate, and frequent conversation.

If God is the first and primary Being of the invisible world, with whom we are called upon to speak, the angels are the second great beings with whom we are to communicate in prayer. Who are the angels? They are the heavenly spirits created by God before He made the visible world and the human race.

Not a few fathers of the Church say seriously: "In God's original plan of

creation there was only to have been this invisible created world. But part of that created world sinned, so to replenish heaven - - there must have been a lot of places to fill -- with those who would honor Him for eternity, He then decided to create mankind."

The angels are pure spirits who have no bodies like our own but they are persons no less than we. They are intelligent beings whom God brought into being to praise, love and serve Him no less than us. They are the angels who proved their loyalty to God and are now in heaven with God, never to be separated from Him. Their role in God's plan for the universe, and how this bears emphasis, is to serve our needs. They are literally the guardians of the human race. And it is part of our faith that each one of us has his or her own guardian spirit.

Guardian angels are consequently part of God's supernatural providence, which as we know works through creatures from the higher to the lower; needless to say we are the lower. Within the realm of created beings the angels are more like God because they are pure spirits having no body, but they are also like us because we too have a mind and a will, so we can talk to the angels.

We read in the lives of the saints how friendly some of them were in their prayerful communication with the angels. Why not? Each one of us has a constant, daily companion at our side, whose responsibility is not only to guard us from evil, but to guide us in the ways of God. He is often talking to us if only we are ready to hear. And a large part of our prayer with the angels, especially our own guardian spirit, should be humbly listening to what he has to say.

The Saints

There is one more level of the invisible world of prayer with which we are to converse in addition to God and the angels, and that is the universe of the saints. By the saints we here mean first and mainly those men and women whom the Church has raised to the honors of the altar and has infallibly declared to be with God in glory.

One of the less well-known passages of the Second Vatican Council occurs in the Constitution on the Church where we are urged to be more responsive to the invisible world of the saints on high.

We are told, "It is not merely because of their example that we cherish the memory of those in heaven. We seek rather that by this devotion to the exercise of fraternal charity the union of the whole Church in the Spirit may be strengthened.

Exactly as Christian communion between people on their earthly pilgrimage brings us closer to Christ, and conversation with believers on earth deepens our knowledge and love of Christ, so our communion with the saints joins us to Christ from whom as from its fountain and head issues all grace and the very life of the people of God."

The saints behold the face of God. By speaking with them and listening to them we learn much about this God whom they now know as we hope one day to understand. And they can help us as only those who have reached their destiny can assist those -- that is us -- who are still in such desperate need.

▪Epilogue I have a short epilogue. I would like to end these reflections where we began, by asking ourselves and answering our own question, "What is the meaning of prayer?" Prayer is the sublime conversation we are mysteriously able to hold with the invisible world of God and of God's angels and saints. It is sublime because that is what we are preparing for during our stay on earth. Prayer is the one activity that will not be interrupted by death, but will continue in heaven, never to end.

Of course, prayer on earth requires effort, but that is as it should be, since all other labor in this life has only as much value and as much meaning, and is only as pleasing to God as it is enveloped by prayer. Those who pray now will pray in eternity, which is another name for heaven. No one else will get there. Prayer is the indispensable and infallible means of reaching our destiny.