
ON PRAYER

Marcel Légaut

*What is essential in prayer
belongs to the order of the being* ⁽¹⁾

In prayer, what is essential is not what one says, but what one is. The same reciprocity that exists between what one is and what one says, between what one is and what one does, exists also between payer and action provided prayer is rooted in the being of the person who prays. When this is so, we draw from within ourselves both the words we say and the actions we carry out. We surrender totally to them, and by doing so, we raise them to a higher order. However ordinary the words we speak because of the everyday use we make of them, and however simple our actions, we mark them with our own personality through an activity that is a true creation. Under these conditions, our words and actions become the species of our prayer, a prayer that is consecrated by our *presence*.

Generally, when we speak of prayer, we refer mainly to the formulas we pronounce, which can only be the substance of true prayer inas-

(1) "On Prayer" is the text that Legaut conceived as introduction to his texts about prayer. The sum of this introduction and the texts on prayer make up the book "*Man's Prayers*". This book was twice published when Legaut was alive, in 1978 and in 1984. However, the two editions differed. "On Prayer" was different. In 1984, Legaut omitted 12 paragraphs from the beginning of the 1978 version, replacing it by two others. When the book was translated into catalan and spanish, Legaut, who still subscribed what he wrote in the omitted paragraphs, agreed to restore those twelve paragraphs of the 1978 version and follow them up with the 1984 one, with its two specific paragraphs and the rest of it, which, except for a few variations, coincided with the version of 1978. The notes point out where the different parts are stitched in. Legaut also agreed on the subtitles indicating the thematic advance of the text.

much as what is said is related to what one is, and therefore related to how one lives and acts. On the other hand, 'being aware of what one says' goes farther than simply minding what we say, and farther also than the mere effort to nurture ourselves from a text, for there is a way of nurturing oneself that is not communion. 'To be aware of our words' actually consists in transmuting the raw nature of the useful word (in the meaning of a dictionary) into a fruitful word, suitable to what one is. Praying and saying prayers are of a different order.

The time we spend in 'saying prayers' doesn't necessarily coincide with the time we are present to ourselves. Prayer frequently becomes 'an occupation' during which we are easily distracted and escape from self. One can easily say prayers without really praying. Furthermore, by believing we are praying, we come to ignore that we don't know what praying is really about. In this way, protected by the mere observance of doctrine or law, we can easily avoid the demands of true prayer; and then, by reason of a disguised infidelity, one can adulterate prayer and make of it a mere religious practice.

There is no doubt that in extreme circumstances, we can *be* without doing or saying anything. That is why, in exceptional conditions, we can pray without the need of prayers. However, ordinarily, there is interdependence between what we are and the manner and expression of our being. The same occurs with our prayer. Prayer that is true prayer doesn't consist solely on what is said at any given time. Everything we have done in our lives, that originates exactly from our mission, is present in our prayer and adds weight to it; a weight to which is added, in those circumstances, all that we shall be able to do in the future, by means of our own potentialities, known or unknown, if we remain faithful.

Our words and actions, in the measure they are aligned to our mission, facilitate our approach to the mystery of our humanity, through which our approach to the Divine Mystery is also facilitated. A prayer that springs from our mission and leads to it, since in this case is a

form and expression of our being, places us into a relationship with God beyond the formulas we can use to express ourselves, and, ultimately, address ourselves to Him.

God doesn't listen at the same level of what is said, nor does He see at the level of what is done. God perceives and receives in the order of being. The behaviours (speech and gestures) that express prayer are not intended to keep God informed but are rather meant to help us, through them, move further towards becoming, which is what is meant by entering into relationship with God.

These behaviours, rooted in what we are and consecrated by our presence, are the fruit of true creation. No technique or method can, by themselves alone, produce them, though they can, indirectly, facilitate their development to such a degree that they may become necessary, to a certain point, not as something essential but as something indispensable.

The behaviours that express prayer demand an activity that cannot be carried out without us that are its agents in spite of the fact that we are only its scenario since such activity does not originate in us alone. It is God who promotes this activity that we are called to provide for. And because, in this way, our prayer is His, God attends to the movement that begets it in those of us that embrace it.

Prayer and Mission

In this way, prayer intertwines with one's own mission: it is the vanguard that announces and prepares it, and, when it becomes a thanksgiving, is the rearguard that closes and reaches it. In order to pray, it is fundamental to become aware of what one must personally be in the order of mission, beyond what can generally be specified and demanded from everybody. There is no prayer unless, in some way, the threshold of fidelity is transcended beyond obedience and docility.

The crossing of the threshold of fidelity remains implicit most of the time. However, each one, according to each one's possibilities, and thanks to the influence of our maturing humanity and to the events of our history, must make clear this step if one doesn't want to experience the fragility of change at the mercy of seasons and climates, changes that die with them and leave one entrapped in their cycle.

The only zone in which prayer is real, that is, stable in its object, continuous in time and unique in its movement, in the midst of the various expressions of words and actions, is the zone of the personal mission that each one is called to carry out and must exercise not only to become true to ourselves but also, and at the same time, to maintain and occupy the position that intimately corresponds to us and the place assigned to us in society and, to a greater scope, in the development of the World. ⁽²⁾

Prayer and ideas about God

What is essential in prayer is not what we say but what we *are*. The essence of prayer is there where what we have really lived and not simply suffered in the past is inscribed, and where all that we must live in the future, thanks to our capabilities, lies as if in reserve. The expression of our prayer, however, depends less on what we *are* than on the concept we have of God stemming from the concept we have of ourselves.

In the early stages of life, we form an idea of God that can only be passively conceived, following the general way of thinking. This idea is, usually, a simple transposition to our current universal mentality, of the very idea that, from remote times, has prevailed in all epochs. It is an idea that, no matter how primitive or instinctive, it comes

⁽²⁾ Up to here, the text belongs to the first introduction, of 1978. From here on, the text is from 1984.

from so deep in the heart of time and is so imbedded in the skin of our species that even today imposes itself in a brutal manner when we feel threatened in what is vital to us.

In our days, the concept we had of God during our youth gradually loses its influence, as we progress in self-consciousness and become more autonomous against everything that had molded rather than formed us. Thanks to the progress of science and due to certain circumstances in life, and also if we aren't stubbornly resistant, we are little by little led to reviewing the concept of God we had initially subscribed to without really giving it much thought. If we don't stop and turn back from the path that opens up before us when we try to be authentic in our actions, and specially in our prayer, we shall finally get to replace our secure and spontaneous belief in God by a well reflected but always tentative intuition about Him.

This reflected but always tentative intuition about God, as we grow conscious of our singular originality, progressively acquires consistency and slowly but steadily makes its abode in us. That is how we finally come to recognize, underlying all our activities, an Action that is continuous, persevering, and somehow oriented, which, at very entrails of our decisions and through all the complex intricacies of our history, enables us to become ourselves.

This intuition is so rooted in the past and, so to speak, so magnetized by what lies ahead for us – not accessible yet – that it becomes non-communicable to others. By its nature, it accompanies the faith movement that originates in each person. It opens, through a sort of annunciation, towards what does not depend on knowledge only. And, precisely for this reason, it doesn't push us to adhere, in an absolute and uncritical way, to a belief that, hovering around the mystery of God, believes to be about to grasp it just when it vanishes, in the same way credulity and instinctive religions do.

Prayer and confessional atheism

At times, this fundamental intuition, reflected but always tentative, in spite of the fact that it replaces the spontaneous and secure belief in God in a more consistent manner each time, manifests its existence only in an indirect and hidden way. Beyond the motives we can formulate ourselves, this intuition is what makes us really surrender our lives either by way of denying our rejection or by way of affirming our commitment. This is so to the point that in spite of all the ambiguities involved in every human decision, our future entirely becomes a consequence of its powerful influence.

Hidden in depth, disguised by what is imposed from the outside, not recognized in its singular origin, this intuition, reflected but always tentative, does not necessarily find the medium to explicate in a suitable manner its peculiar nature. That is why it can carry out its action in persons who, because of their honesty and for reasons they think justifiable, reject the affirmation of the existence of God. This intuition is what makes those who profess themselves atheists, with such integrity, say to themselves words that stem from so deeply within that, although God is not mentioned, they bear what characterizes true prayer.

Prayer and the stages of life

As we go through life, our prayer evolves at the same rate as our capacity to go deeper into ourselves. Gradually growing in self-possession, we start committing to prayer in such a way that it increasingly concerns the whole of our being. This is the reason why the stages we go through along the path of our humanity only allow us a conventional and routinely use of a formulation, that in the past could have been legitimate, if we insist on using it without transposing it to a form fitting our actual life.

Henceforth, so as to really pray and not just recite prayers, we have to invent new ways of expression that truly correspond – and with even

greater accuracy than the old ones – to what we are in conscience and to what we envision of God acting in our lives, both through our relationship with Him and what we receive from Him and also through what we offer Him, such as we feel inclined to dare think and affirm.

Only some true words, echo of a depth rarely disclosed, can allow us to pray with our whole being. Words begotten of just thoughts, elevate our spirit through the action of an unspeakable ferment, and have, on account of their origin not just human, a fecundity that is intuited even before it is manifested.

To say true words, born both of what has been vigorously lived, and cannot cease being, as born of what will be yet essential to live in a way that will always remain, is a rare thing. Such words are not at the disposal of those who make an effort to formulate them merely because they try to do so. These words are from God even though they cannot exist without the persons that pronounce them and express themselves through them. Prayer, being from the human person, is from God and, therefore, is attended in the same motion that makes it spring up in those who welcome it; and these, with their tacit consent, are driven on to grow in their being.

Prayer, mission and bearing witness

In this way, prayer intertwines itself with the mission each one is called to fulfil and which is necessary to exercise so as to, simultaneously, become oneself and occupy the place that corresponds to each because of what they are; a place they are called to cover in the society of mankind and, with a greater perspective, in the World to come⁽³⁾.

To pray; to be faithful to our mission; to be oriented in the direction of the meaning of our life, something which we are never fully con-

⁽³⁾ The specific text of 1984 ends here. The last two paragraphs are similar to the last ones of 1978. From here onwards, the text is common to both Introductions, of 1978 and 1984.

scious of as we go on; to exercise in this manner all our potentialities; to make fruitful, thanks to this very movement, our whole past whatever it might have been, positive or negative; and, according to what we have become and are on the way to becoming, to develop through the appropriation of the circumstances of all kinds that determine us; all this enables those who are faithful, on account of what is essential in them, to become a unified and unique activity which belongs to the order of the action, one and unique, that is the creative Act from which the human being proceeds to such a degree.

In this manner, through the motion that visits us and that we welcome –a motion that is so much our own not only because it is inseparable from what we have lived but also because it intervenes in the genesis of what is to come –, we become creators. In this sense, through the awareness that we attain about this motion, we become witnesses rather than spectators. Witnessese of the creative Activity that is developing in the World, mainly in the area of mission. Creator and witness are the two titles by which man has access to God and through which one’s prayer can turn into communion with Him and become, in addition, a weight and an influence upon Him, no matter how unthinkable this might seem.

The authentic prayers of others inspire our own.

Examples from Tradition

So as not to limit ourselves to only recite prayers believing we are praying, we must create our prayer in such a way that it *is* at the same level we *are*. That is the reason why the prayer of another person can only become our own if we recreate it to our image, with our own hands. If we don’t do this, it would only be a supplementary formula to be added to the already numerous formulas to which we limit ourselves when we “say prayers”.

Any created work silently invites the onlooker to become its witness. In this way, every created work can become the source of an inspira-

tion that has its effect on those who rise to that level, through an elevation over which we have no complete command because it doesn't depend on us alone, thus enabling us to become creators also, recreating that very work to our own measure, opening up to it and receiving from it as if we were its own authors. That is how the true prayer of a believer can be for another an indirect occasion for real prayer. However, for this prayer to be an indirect occasion for us, it is necessary that, when we intend use it, we envision the interior state that led its author to pray with it. Only thus are we prepared to embrace, through the mediation of the words of a given prayer, the inspiration that allows us to pray authentically with the same formula as another.

This is so with all prayers that express a lived experience and consequently are not pieces of work composed solely to elicit certain feelings in the readers or only structured meticulously so as to observe the norms of official theology.

Isn't that the case of the Psalms? The authors created them for their own use. They composed them driven from within. They nurtured on them because they lived them. They found and discovered themselves in them because they created them, and in doing so, they self-expressed themselves. Whenever they addressed themselves to the "God of Heaven and Earth", following the pattern of their mental universe, they were disclosing themselves and thus accepting themselves. In the measure in which we are actually able to witness, in the present, the spiritual activity – true inspiration – that led to their composition, we are capable of turning those prayers into authentic prayers for ourselves. On the contrary, if we limit ourselves to merely reciting them, even when done with scrupulous attention to the mental universe of its authors, we will just be saying prayers with them but shall not really be praying.

In the same way that other virtuous actions are done out submission to a rule ordered and received from outside without internalising it as

a demand imposed from within, saying prayers is a virtuous action far easier and less exacting than truly praying. Saying prayers like that is an ascetic exercise that, not attaining the spiritual level, can, on the contrary, by diverting thought and falsifying feeling, adulterate the point of view that we must adopt today in order to be true to God as well as to mankind and the World.

The disciples, before asking Jesus to teach them to pray, used to simply recite the psalms with devotion. In no way were they concerned with entering into the interior knowledge of what the ancient authors had lived at the time of their inspiration, so as to be ready to perceive the resonance of them in themselves. The formula of the Lord's Prayer that Jesus gave them was the fruit of his own prayer, in harmony with his mission. Created by him, he got inspired on seeing them. This formula can help us truly pray, though only indirectly, as an opportunity for us to be ready to correspond to it intimately. Besides, it doesn't excuse us from inventing our own prayer: a prayer born of our personal mission and which sustains it as the echo itself of God's calling.

The case of the poems of St. John of the Cross, wouldn't it be the same as that of the psalms or the Lord's Prayer? Nobody would think that he composed those poems just because he was a poet... The poems were his prayer. Creating them, saying them, maybe repeating them over and over again for pleasure, because they inspired him, was a way of praying with which – we can imagine – he never grew tired, neither the words wore out, nor grew old because of so much usage. He didn't compose the poems he placed at the beginning of his treatises on spiritual life as a form of prefaces either. On the contrary, composed and prayed long before, because they said to him, John of the Cross, what he was living or had lived or had to live – since, at the level of this type of prayer, the past, the present and the future convene in an instant –, these poems were the origin of his didactic developments that later on materialized into a few books which show the marks of the mentality of his times more obviously

than his poems, in which the reflection of the universal, that he was then living in depth, is intuited even today with more ease.

Couldn't this also be the case with the Prologue of the fourth gospel? It is reasonable to think that this prologue was not principally on the mind of its author – at least of its main author – as the theological basis of his gospel, nor as the synthesis of what later on he would plan to develop and prove within the anthropological and theological climate of his epoch, but rather it was the meditative prayer of a disciple after having reflected at length on what his Master himself was, what He was for him and for the World. It is very likely that he would often repeat this text when, under God's motion and so as to invoke it, he was creating his major text: "The Gospel of 'John' according to the spirit of Jesus". Wouldn't perhaps this repetition be his way of making himself present unto himself and unto God in order to attain the level of his live memory of Jesus? If the fourth gospel, as a whole, is the one that seems to be more meditated and more internalised by its author, and, consequently, the one depending most on his mentality, wouldn't that be precisely because, while he was writing it, he would consciously and even blindly, adhere to the fundamental prayer that he had placed at its beginning? Wouldn't this be the way he received the inspiration that granted his pen that unique depth and vigour so generally acknowledged?

Summing it up: If we are capable of entering into the spirit that led a person to create a prayer, then we can really pray with it, provided we first read it within a suitable climate and rhythm, but, above all, if we can manage to recite it by heart, without effort, as if it would spontaneously spring forth from our heart and would come naturally present to our spirit.

The secret of a rubric

In the old times, in the prayer books for the faithful we had prayers to be recited every day, at morning and night. At the heading of these

texts, in red or italics, and as a sort of rubric, was the phrase “let us place ourselves in the presence of God”, and then followed the text that was considered the prayer as such.

Well, it was precisely that first rubric that indicated and specified a predetermined interior action and intimate disposition, attained the very essence of prayer, more so than the literary developments that followed: developments sometimes lyric and always affective; words that, according to expectations, cultivated, in those using them, feelings of fervour, of repentance, of submission or of adoration; expressions, it was believed, that satisfied what a merciful and kind-hearted God expected to hear.

In order to pray – it was said – one must be in God’s presence, present to God. However, in order to be present to God, one has to be present to oneself. To succeed in having God listen to us, we must be able to listen to ourselves. Therefore, in accordance with the perspectives here developed on true prayer, it would be fitting to add something to the old rubric, and express in a more complete manner, the inner disposition that allows us to pray, saying: “let us place ourselves in the presence of ourselves and of God”; “of ourselves” first, given that the way that leads us to God passes, first, through what is most intimate of ourselves.