

PRAYER – CONTEMPLATION

Prayer— an expression of love for God

"God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 Jn 4:16). These words from the First Letter of John express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny. In the same verse, Saint John also offers a kind of summary of the Christian life: "We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us". In these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his / her life. Fr. Nicolas Barre firmly held that, not only do we have to believe in God's love for us, we also have to love Him in return. Prayer is, to Fr Barre, an expression of this love for God. It is the extent of God's love which surpasses all our comprehension. He loves us more than we can ever believe. We do not realise the extent of our hidden treasure. Fr Barre was so convinced of God's love for us that he told his first community that the only security we have is God's excessive love for us.

Two types of contemplation

In Fr. Barre's prayer, two types of contemplation can be detected: contemplation of the transcendence of God, and contemplation of Jesus. Of paramount importance to Fr. Barre is his conviction that contemplation and action must be inextricably linked and interdependent.

Contemplation of the transcendence of God

Recognition of the transcendence of God is at the heart of Nicolas Barre's prayer. His way of speaking about God could come as a surprise to 20th century readers. Modern authors invite us to come to God with confidence and simplicity; by contrast, Fr. Barre stressed the need for awe and was distrustful of an excessive familiarity. Awe is the opposite and the antidote of an undue familiarity.

One reason for this approach could be attributed to the thinking of the 17th century when the sense of hierarchy was widespread and the majesty of royalty was deeply felt. The king would be acting beneath his dignity if he were over-familiar; those in 'high places' had to keep their place. Fr. Barre borrowed from the society as well as from the liturgy of his day the title 'Majesty' which he freely gave to God, to express the respect due to His transcendence.

Like all spiritual people of every age, he wants to express that God is infinitely above us. "God lives in light inaccessible" (1 Tim.6:16) says St. Paul, and Nicolas Barre echoes his sentiments. God is inaccessible, unapproachable, or rather He is only accessible in Christ: "God of all depth and mystery, who dwells in the darkness of light inaccessible." (SC 3)

According to Fr. Barre, what we can and ought to do is to adore humbly in recognition of the Divine Transcendence. For him, adoration is distinguished, if not altogether separated, from love. Adoration comes first, love only comes later, as a gift of God. (MAP 226, 231)

"Enter into your own nothingness before the immense greatness of God. Recognise your total dependence on God and be ready to let go to God's desires. Ask for nothing more and desire nothing more." (L 36)

Contemplation of Jesus

To Fr. Barre, the first and principal object which concerns the love and complaisance of the Eternal Father is His Son, Jesus Christ. Then, since the unique object of the Eternal Father's love is His Son, Jesus must be the centre of our hearts and minds.

Contemplation of the Cross (Jesus crucified) is not the only way to gaze on Christ. Fr. Barre also wants to contemplate Jesus, still an infant (the mystery of the Incarnation). The schools he founded were very quickly to be known as 'The Charitable Schools of the Infant Jesus'. This contemplation of Jesus Incarnate is clearly stated in our Book of the Institute:

"Faith in the mystery of the Incarnation is at the heart of our vocation. In Jesus we contemplate the Word of God who became man, even a little child. We learn from Him the way of humility and abandonment by which God continues to become incarnate in us and in the whole of humanity. This contemplation transforms our way of looking at the realities of the world and awakens a desire within us to adhere more closely to the Will of God." (BI, #13)

Prayer, then, is an encounter with God, which in time can transform our attitudes and behaviour, leading us to look at life and reality from God's perspective.

Contemplation — action

Fr. Barre proposed an active, balanced spirituality, where prayer and the apostolate support each other mutually. The same depth and the same psychological realism is characteristic of his teaching on the relationship between our love for God and our love for our neighbour. He knows that our love for God grows through service of others. . the love which God lavishes upon us and which we in turn must share with others..

"The active and contemplative life should become one. This is what you must do ... if you possess the spirit of your Institute to any extent." (PM 32)

"The Incarnation is the work of the Holy Spirit. If we allow Him to take possession of us, He will gradually bring about the unity of our apostolic lives in which action and contemplation permeate each other. Our whole life can then become an experience of God. We will encounter Him in the joys and difficulties of mission as well as in moments of silence and recollection." (BI, #14)

Fr. Barre saw in action – whether communicating the word to others or performing the more menial services in love — the natural fulfilment of contemplation. By temperament Fr. Barre was a mystic. Yet he was able to gather up the threads of the most mundane details and establish an inner dynamism in the heart of the common life. Through prayer he sought an inner dynamism, balancing the material and spiritual elements.

While contemplative prayer embraces the Will of God globally as revealed in Scripture, the active life has to accept from God new situations, the unexpected, and continuously changing events which can be sometimes frustrating, sometimes happy. Thus we can remain united to God while in action. Although commonplace today, this idea was new in Fr. Barre's time. There is something especially relevant today in his insistence that the cleavage between enclosed contemplatives and practical persons making their way through the world was a mistake.

In the 17th century, the contemplative life was often given priority over the active life. It was considered necessary that some, e.g. the Marthas, take over the material tasks to allow the others, the Marys freedom for contemplation. Such attitudes reduce action to the service of contemplation.

Teresa of Avila held that the contemplative life was the best. Fr. Barre made no such comparison. He even discouraged women already committed as Charitable Mistresses from leaving the active life to enter the contemplative life. (PM, 1-5) this would be an opting out, because the apostolic life is also a life of union with God and we ought not to leave the way on which God has set us.

Prayer and Discernment

To maintain a balanced spirituality between contemplation and action, we need to make discernment a way of life. At the basis of discernment is a desire to be truly sensitive to the action of God in our lives. It calls for deep faith and confidence in God's love and God's call to love. When a decision has to be made, discernment involves a readiness to remain open to all possible options that may be presented. This requires giving time and space for silence and prayer, allowing oneself to be nurtured by the Word of God. Proclaiming Jesus Christ requires long periods of solitude and deep prayer. As stated in our Book of the Institute:

"Proclaiming Jesus Christ demands that our knowledge of His message be related our life and be constantly renewed. This knowledge comes to us especially through prayerful and reflective reading of the Word of God as well as through other readings which will help to increase our faith and inspire our apostolic life." (BI, #17)

In our life of contemplation in action, we need to pray with Fr. Barre: "Lord, I want nothing more, I desire nothing more, only to be ready to desire what you desire and as you desire it"