

Chapter Twenty

Christian Prayer

III: Praying in the Holy Spirit

Purpose: This teaching starts from the essential role of the Holy Spirit in all Christian prayer. Part I (Chapter Eighteen) emphasized the Trinitarian pattern of all Christian worship, that is, it is supremely addressed to the Father in Christ through the Holy Spirit, and is inherently covenantal-ecclesial. Part II (Chapter Nineteen) examined the Our Father as the pattern for all Christian prayer, public and private. In this teaching we seek to unpack what it means to pray through and in the Holy Spirit.

Presentation: This teaching should be very practical. It should be accompanied by examples. Maybe there can be moments where the teachers invites a response from the audience about the experience of being led by the Holy Spirit in prayer. It is very important that people understand the difference between prayer that is led by the Holy Spirit and prayer that is our decision. This distinction is grounded in a theology of the interaction of the divine and the human. Emphasize that we are not asked to choose between the two, but to allow both elements full expression in a variety of ways.

The Interaction of the Divine and the Human

The model for our understanding is the Incarnation. Jesus is the eternal Son of God, who took on human flesh and became truly man. As eternal Son, he totally honoured the Father within the communion of the Holy Trinity. As man, he prayed to the Father as we read in the Gospels: Matt. 26: 39; 27: 46; Luke 3: 21; 6: 12; 11: 1; 22: 41; 23: 34. He would have joined in the worship of the synagogue. In our experience as Christians we experience a difference between the prayer when we are allowing ourselves to be led by the Holy Spirit and the prayer that through the grace of God we make as Christians in full control of what we say. St Paul makes this kind of distinction in the chapter he wrote about speaking on tongues: “I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also.” (1 Cor. 14: 15).

In the first kind of prayer, praying with the spirit, we surrender our minds, hearts and affections to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Most of the time, we make a decision to allow this to happen now, but it can suddenly come upon us. However, God respects our freedom and so He never forces us. Paul says that “if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful.” (1 Cor. 14: 14). This makes it clear that he is speaking of the human spirit as distinct from the human mind. When we are baptized in the Holy Spirit then there is a surrender of the mind to the action of the Holy Spirit. This surrendered prayer is symbolized in the prayer of tongues in which we can decide when to begin praying in tongues, but what we say is in no way shaped by our intelligence. In the second kind of prayer, which can be taught, is what we have probably been taught since our childhood. It is prayer that begins with the mind. We decide to pray, we decide in what way to pray, we decide what we will express in our prayers, whether spontaneously or from a written or memorized form. This shows that it is wrong to think that spontaneous prayer is automatically Spirit-led and using existing forms is not.

With prayer of this second kind, it has long been taught that there is a progression typically beginning from forms of meditation, e.g. on Scriptural passages, in which the mind and imagination are more active, towards more contemplative prayer, in which the mind is stilled to give way to the heart. So, in the words of the Catholic Catechism, “Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire. ... This form of prayerful

reflection is of great value, but Christian prayer should go further: to the knowledge of the love of Jesus, to union with him.” (CCC, para. 2708). “Contemplative prayer seeks him ‘whom my soul loves.’ (Song of Songs 1: 7). It is Jesus, and in him, the Father. ... In this inner prayer we can still meditate, but our attention is fixed on the Lord himself.” (CCC, para. 2709).

The Contribution of Renewal in the Spirit

Through the Renewal and the gift of baptism in the Spirit the Lord has been restoring to the ordinary faithful in the Church this reality of a deeper surrender to the risen Jesus in the Spirit that opens us to the charisms and to experience of praying with the spirit as Paul speaks of it in 1 Corinthians 14. This praying with the spirit most often begins with the gift of tongues, which is primarily a gift of prayer. But it often opens up to other forms of praying with the spirit, such as rejoicing in the spirit and the gift of tears (see below for more on these forms of praying). It is wrong to think that these forms of prayer did not exist for many centuries before the coming of charismatic renewal. St Augustine (354 - 430), for example, experienced the prayer of *jubilatio* as a form of singing in the Spirit, writing: “The jubilus is a melody which conveys that the heart is in travail over something that it cannot bring forth in words. (When you cannot say what you want to say) what else can you do but jubilate?”¹ Richard Rolle (1300 - 49), an English mystic, had personal experience that echoes St Augustine.²

What is new in the 20th century outpouring of the Holy Spirit is this kind of prayer being given to millions of Christians and it being seen as a normal part of Christian worship and prayer. Through the centuries it was typically seen as exceptional, a special grace granted to really holy people after long years of asceticism and trials. But this background explains why we hear so little teaching on this subject. It is the charismatic movement from the second half of the 20th century that has particularly spread this kind of prayer experience.³

In the Renewal, singing in the Spirit is not just a personal private experience, but something that is often expressed corporately in a prayer meeting or in a liturgy. It becomes part of the renewal of the Church, of the whole body of Christ, of entering into the Lord’s heart for the Church and the world.

Head to Heart to Guts

In charismatic experience, we can see a process whereby the Christian receives the Holy Spirit more fully into his/her whole being. Because we are very bodily beings, this process

¹ From Augustine’s sermon on Psalm 32, cited in Eddie Ensley, *Sounds of Wonder* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1977), p. 27. Ensley’s book gathers many similar examples from all periods of the Church’s history.

² “I was sitting in a certain chapel, delighting in the sweetness of prayer or meditation, when suddenly I felt within myself an unusually pleasant heat. At first I wondered where it came from, but it was not long before I realized that it was from none of his creatures but from the Creator himself. It was, I found, more fervent and pleasant than I had ever known. But it was just over nine months before a conscious and incredibly sweet warmth kindled me, and I knew the infusion and understanding of heavenly, spiritual sounds, sounds which pertain to the song of eternal praise, and to the sweetness of unheard melody; sounds which cannot be known or heard save by him who has received it, and who himself must be clean and separate from the things of the earth.” (*The Fire of Love*, Penguin Classics edition, 1972 p. 93).

³ The Pentecostals prepared the way for this, but they focused more on tongues as the initial evidence of baptism in the Spirit and did not teach so much on tongues as a form of regular prayer for all Christians baptized in the Spirit.

in the spirit has bodily repercussions. There is a process from the head (mind) to the heart, and then from the heart to the “guts”, what in Scripture is sometimes called the “entrails”. The Spirit takes a fuller possession of us. The result is that we can use more and more of our human faculties, senses, abilities in the worship of our God. When the Spirit has penetrated the guts, then we can laugh and weep in the Spirit, we can groan and travail, we can share in the joys and pains of the Lord. This seems to be what Paul writes about in Romans 8, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And He who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” (Rom. 8: 26 - 27). Here we can see how enriching this opening of the whole human being to the Holy Spirit is for the Church’s task of intercession, where so often we do not know how to pray, and need simply to enter into the groaning of the Spirit for the Lord’s people and their needs.

However, as Paul indicates in 1 Cor. 14, we never leave the mind behind. The mind is a distinctive element in how God has formed men and women. So as Paul says we need to pray with the Spirit, and we need to pray with the mind. Here it is important that we allow the Holy Spirit and to sanctify and utilize all dimensions of human experience and need. In the book of Ecclesiastes (not often used in teachings on Christian life and prayer), there is a deep wisdom in the list of “times” in chapter 3; they include, “a time to weep, and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, ... a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to seek and a time to lose; a time to rend and a time to sew; a time to keep silence and a time to speak” (Eccles. 3: 4 - 7). This is an important lesson for our prayer and our lives as Christians. Let us look at some examples:

- A time to pray with the spirit and a time to pray with the mind;
- A time to listen to the Word of God and a time to speak His praises;
- A time for silent prayer and a time to shout and make a joyful noise for the Lord;
- A time for speaking and a time for listening;
- A time for liturgy and a time for free worship;
- A time to be with God alone and a time to be with the Church community;
- A time to rejoice and a time to repent;
- A time for thinking with God and a time for just being with God.

It is humanly and spiritually important to incorporate this variety into the way we live and the way we pray. This variety expresses the many elements in human life, flowing from different dimensions of the human (corporeal and personal, mind and spirit), different situations that come and go (times of joy and times of sorrow, times of personal crisis), different stages of life (being young or being old, being married or single, having children or not having children to care for), different stages of spiritual growth (new convert, mature believer), different callings (priest, religious, lay person; evangelist, pastor or intercessor). For our prayer to bring our whole lives before the Lord, many not all of these differences require different elements in our prayer. In these cases, it is not legitimate to say “I am a quiet person, so vigorous praise out loud is not for me” or “I am always so busy I never have time to be still). All the examples above of “a time for” apply all our lives to all stages of the Christian life. However, it is true that the more mature believer is less

governed by emotions and needs longer times of quiet. All the different components of corporate worship (praise, adoration, thanksgiving, intercession, repenting, listening) are expressed in the liturgy at different moments and with the variety of seasons and feasts.

Groaning in the Spirit. Groaning in the Spirit normally only starts in people who have surrendered themselves more fully to the Holy Spirit. Groaning like laughter arises from the guts, the belly or the stomach. If we feel any urge to do this, we should respond and allow the Spirit to lead us and find expression in our groans, our cries, our grunts. Sometimes we may have an idea of what it is about, other times not. When we are faced by major trials in the Church, issues in which there is a real spiritual battle, it is good to position ourselves to respond to the Holy Spirit in this way. It is not likely to happen when we are comfortable in an arm-chair. Maybe we should prostrate ourselves on the ground, maybe we should kneel and bow deeply.⁴

Questions for Discussion

1. What is the difference between praying with the spirit without the mind and praying with the mind enlightened by the Holy Spirit?
2. How have you experienced the place of meditation and the place of contemplative forms of prayer?
3. How much variety do you allow for in the ways you pray and the form of prayer you use?

⁴ See also the end of Chapter Four.