



### Meditation- Prayer in the midst of action

#### **Everyone prays, in one way or another**

Prayer has always existed in all religions and civilizations. From anguished supplication to praise, from the most self-serving request to the most humble, prayer is a spontaneous act, springing from the heart of man who asks for help or protection, or who gives thanks. It brings into play the psychological and emotional components of the human being, as well as his or her more or less clearly expressed desires.

#### **An egocentric prayer?**

What kind of prayer is it, to whom is it addressed and for what purpose? It is easier to denounce the magical and utilitarian abuses of prayer than to talk about its positive aspects. Isn't man calling on some power forged by his imagination, the answer to all his desires? To pray to satisfy one's own desires is to make an all too human image of the gods. It is to suppose that prayer is only about its effectiveness, whereas it resides in the faith of the one who prays.

The objection is heard: in the Bible, in the psalms in particular, and in the versions of the Gospel, are believers not enjoined upon to call on "God" for help? Ask and you shall receive", says Jesus (Mt 21:22). The Lord's Prayer that he taught is an instant prayer of request. What is the answer? However, we must also hear Jesus' solemn warning against repeating formulas that by themselves are supposed to be effective. The same Jesus does not fail to remind us that God does not need prayers to be present to men and their needs.

“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. 8Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Mt 6:7-8).

### **This "absent" God is a problem**

One of the difficulties is that God is rather perceived as absent. We can be troubled by the question "Where was God in Auschwitz?" (Hans Jonas) which could mean "How would we have wanted him to manifest himself there?», thus falling into the trap of a theistic conception. Or, as Elie Wiesel says in his book *The Night*: "Where is he? Here he is, hanging here, on these gallows...". To Job's cry, there is no rational answer. Job sends away the reasoning friends who would like to close his mouth and his cry rises to God (Job 19:1-7). Faced with the pain and sin of the world, can our prayer only prolong and echo this cry? Yet Christ has come. God became man. He has come down to the depths of our hell. He is alive! The light shines in the darkness.

### **Praying to God, allowing God to pray in us**

The person who prays stops trying to impose his will on God. He affirms that he conforms to his own will and places himself in a more just relationship with him. All prayer implies recollection, silence, and a return to oneself to silence the tumult of representations and emotions. This interior prayer abandons speech in order to reach silence, which attests to the certainty of a presence. It is no longer a face-to-face encounter, always formidable, with an Other outside of oneself, but an encounter, in the depths of oneself, with a Beyond, an All Other experienced as absolute otherness.

Prayer implies the existence of an otherness: there must be another, to whom it is addressed and who is supposed to hear it. There is never a fusion, but an asymmetrical relationship. It is not a simple conversation but is based on faith. As soon as a human being believes, he prays, and where prayer ceases, faith also ceases. We pray first of all to know how to pray, to know how to turn towards God. Prayer is not reduced to a set of recited words or even to a voluntary act towards the other. It is the bearer of a certain conception of the divine, of a theology, of an ethic, of a spirituality.

## **Praying in solidarity with others**

For intercessory prayer it is a matter of bringing into concrete life the thirst for justice and love that we receive from God. I who pray, do not live this concrete life alone. I live it with others, they are part of my life. Their happiness is my happiness, their distress is my distress.

All these beings inevitably emerge in my prayer, since it is there that existence in active, real solidarity is prepared, which is essential to faith: "to act justly, to love with tenderness". The shared sorrow of these beings will also be the occasion to formulate requests. The thought of the distress of certain loved ones, or simply of certain groups of people, even unknown ones, awakens fear in me: the absence of God, the abandonment of man to himself and to the brutal forces of history, all of this impacts me, hurts me and tests me not only by my own life path, but by everything that is human, and especially by the human beings who are close and dear to me.

Everything that makes up my life, my commitments, my loyalties, it is in prayer that I will find the certainty that none of those for whom I pray is forgotten before God. The taste for active and faithful solidarity to help them triumph over their trials. The courage to go beyond my requests, to accept the Absence while making my presence felt.

Without this prayer to endure in solidarity, we may soon say to ourselves: "This person is really screwed up, this is a desperate situation, and this is what life always leads to! So let's take care of ourselves! Profit, selfishness and insurance" (François Varone).

Whether we make it explicit or not, praying is always first of all a dialogue between God and myself, but a dialogue in which others soon join us.

## **What kind of solidarity are we talking about?**

Praying for others in order to radiate, to spread faith in God, hope and meaning. This is concretely translated into active and perceived solidarity, by what Paul calls the Body of Christ (cf. Eph 4:12-16). Christ is the head, we are the members: this is the Church.

Solidarity is only real when it is concrete. The best way to deceive oneself is to declare oneself in solidarity with everyone, especially those who are far away. To be human is to feel solidarity with all humanity. Certainly! But we only reach

humanity through the path of concrete beings, near and far, with whom we enter into alliance and real solidarity. It is the same for the Body of Christ.

### **ACAT's prayer**

In our combat against torture and capital punishment, prayer could appear to be superfluous: why call upon a God who remains silent in the face of suffering? Yet, prayer is the indispensable foundation and extension of action. The prayer of the members of ACAT supports the tortured from a distance and takes into account the torturers, who are also victims of monstrous systems that dehumanize them. Prayer is a spiritual source for ACAT's action: individual prayer that springs from hearts and collective prayer that brings groups together during meetings and ecumenical gatherings.

### **In conclusion**

Is interceding not a matter of letting Christ, through the Holy Spirit, pray in us? To intercede is to partake in Christ's battle. It is to fight alongside him against the powers of darkness - against the forces of death. It is to participate in the victorious agony of the one who, as the Easter hymn proclaims, "by his death has conquered death". To intercede is to watch with the Son of God until the morning comes and the last enemy, Death - all the dead - is defeated. Now, the dawn of this morning has already broken. The light shines in the darkness. The dead and risen Christ is the morning star. (Elisabeth Behr-Sigel)

**ACAT France working group for sensitizing churches**