

THE PRAYER OF INTERCESSION

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Prayer is an immense subject. It embraces and sustains the whole of Christian life. It is both the intimate relationship which each one of us has with our God and that which the Church has with him as the whole body of Christ. To deal with the subject as a whole seems to me impossible, and I should like just to say here something about the prayer of intercession. It is at the very heart of the Christian life. Christ is the supreme intercessor. And what is the Church, in each one of its members and in its totality but an extension in time and space, through the course of the ages and in a world which is gradually being won for him — an extension of the real presence of Christ, incarnate in those who are its members, and also, the presence of the Holy Spirit in those who, singly and together make up the temple of the Spirit?

God at the heart of the world's suffering

And yet the problem raised by the subject of intercession, as by so many kinds of prayer, is a serious problem for modern man: is it still possible for modern man to pray? Is the God to whom we turn in prayer a God who bears any sort of relation to the sufferings of the world? Is he simply a God who hears us, who sympathizes with us but who is still far away; or is he, rather, a God who is at the heart of things? May I remind you of a passage in the Book of Daniel, in the third chapter, which tells the story of the three young men whom King Nebuchadnezzar condemns to death by fire; bound hand and foot they are thrown into the furnace and the king comes to see their ordeal. And then he turns to his counselors and ministers and asks them with an amazement that is yet full of reverent awe: 'Were there not three men thrown in chains into the furnace? How is it then that I now see four men walking freely in the midst of the flames, and one of them looks like a son of the gods?'

...In the furnace... in the storm

This is the God to whom we can address our prayer of intercession, this God who voluntarily enters the fiery furnace, who sets free those who are there, who goes into the very depths of torment and lets himself be scorched by the flames, the God of whom we say in the Apostles' Creed that he descended into hell, who calls us too to descend right into the depths of the human hell, to the depths of suffering, of anguish, doubt, hatred to go down in the peace of Christ and to bring to that place where there is nothing but anguish and horror, the life-giving, transforming presence of the Living God.

We know the famous incident of the storm described in the Gospel according to St Mark, 4. 35-41. Elsewhere a passage well known to you (Matt. 14. 22-32) describes another storm in the course of which Peter, seeing Christ walking on the water amidst all the unleashed fury of the winds and waves, and desiring nothing but to be with his Lord and master, asks that he too may be enabled to walk over the water to join him. Both these storms give us a picture of the way in which so many men and women of our time see God's relation to the suffering and anguish of mankind, but they also reveal to us the truth of the matter. In the former passage, we see the apostles in the grip of the storm. Waves pour into their frail boat, death is waiting to devour them. They are fighting

for their lives, and meanwhile their saviour – Christ – is calmly asleep with his head on a pillow! As they turn to him it is not to ask him piously for help — they show no sign of the faith they would confess if their heart were undivided, in the clear understanding of his divinity and his omnipotence — they are indignant: 'Are you going to let us die?' They might have added: 'If you can't do anything to help us at least be with us in our agony, at least die with us and share our horror in the face of death!' Is not this how millions of men and women see God in the situation? The world in its torment, its fear, its anguish, contending with death, sickness, hunger, despair — and a God who is asleep! — his head resting comfortably on a cushion while his creatures face their death agony? And the other account, the one that shows us St Peter walking on the water, is that not also a picture of the way in which modern man so often thinks of the place, the role, the activity of God? Caught again in a Squall the apostles are struggling for survival, the storm has overwhelmed them, reduced them to sheer terror and doubt, they are held in the clutch of fear; they know that death is just waiting to snatch them in an instant, that there is nothing between it and them but a few flimsy planks, and suddenly, walking on the water, amid this uproar of the elements, they see Christ. But they don't turn to him with their last cry, their last shred of hope, they think they are seeing a ghost: how could it be anything else? How could there be any place for Christ in this elemental chaos? Isn't he the key to all harmony, the centre around whom peace is restored, love reigns, harmony prevails? It cannot be he who is in the midst of the storm, it must be a monstrous apparition, a lie, a slander against God! And yet, it is he, it is he, at the heart of the storm. He is not at the lakeside calling his disciples to a safe harbour. He is at the heart of the chaos, because the Lord who is the Lord of peace, the Lord of life is also the Lord of death. All power is his, he is in command and he is king. No, it is not a ghost, it is Christ. And it is at the very heart of the storm that we find him, at that point where all forms of violence are in collision, where all the forces of death meet in a terrible equipoise that is able to crush everything beneath them: he is at the heart of death itself.

The man to whom Job calls

Having added these images to the one I referred to earlier in Daniel, I would like to add one more. Do you remember the Book of Job, the man upon whom every possible pain and calamity falls one after another, the man who is righteous and yet who is afflicted with all the punishments due to the sinner, to the man who has lost God, who no longer deserves to be called a man? At the end of the ninth chapter of his book we find a passage, which is striking for the sobriety of the anguish it reveals. Job, having come to the end of his strength cries out: 'Where is the man who will stand between me and my judge, who will put his hand on his shoulder and on mine? Where is there such a man?' In his prophetic vision, the vision of a man who can no longer be satisfied with an arbitrary conception of God, who is reaching out for a God of truth, a God of justice, a God of love, he is waiting for the man who will unite him with his judge. That gesture with which the expected man will put his hands on God's shoulder and on his shoulder is a gesture which unites. He is not waiting for someone to come and find a way to a compromise between himself and God, someone who will patch up a temporary peace, bring about an armistice, that is not what he is looking for, he could get all that by submitting like a slave. But Job's heart is that of a son, what he is waiting for is a

reconciliation, a new situation which will create an utterly and completely new relationship between himself and God, in which there will be no place for arbitrary conceptions, and where truth will reign in the utmost fullness of its meaning. It was Christ for whom he was waiting! It was Christ who was to come and stand between God and man, who was to stretch out his hands on the Cross and join man and God together again in a bond of unity which will hold forever.

Intercession, the Act of Incarnate God

When we think of Intercession we so often think in mean and paltry terms. I don't want to speak flippantly, but when we pray for the needs of the world, don't we all too often have the air of reminding God of his sins of omission? Don't we seem to be saying to God: 'Lord, haven't you noticed that this person is in agony and someone else dying of hunger, that one land is being devastated by war and another groaning under a foreign yoke?' Don't we seem to be reminding God of what he ought to be doing if he would only follow our excellent advice. That is not intercession, nor is God's response simply a matter of obedience to the orders we give him in our prayer. We shall come back presently to God's response, but let us now ask ourselves what intercession is, if it is not this appeal to God to do what he ought to do and is not doing.

The term 'intercession' does not denote first and foremost a prayer; it denotes an action; to intercede is to take a step which brings us to the heart of a situation, which brings us to the point where all conflicts meet head-on, where the impact of this collision is at its most violent. Intercession begins with an involvement, an involvement that is definitive, permanent, complete, unlimited, unconditional. The interceding Christ is not the praying Christ, it is the Christ who is the Word of God made flesh, it is the Son of God who becomes the son of man; there is every evidence that he prays, but his act of intercession is first of all an act and not a word. The Son of God becomes the son of man, the Word is made flesh, there is a unique person in whom God and man meet, in whom the breach between God and man is healed, harmony is restored: man and God are united forever in the perfect obedience of the man Jesus Christ of which St Paul speaks, in the perfect, sacrificial self-giving of the Word made flesh. There is in him, as it were, a concentration of the whole conflict, of all that separates man and God, and in him, this conflict, this separation, is brought to an end.

But just how far does this solidarity between man and Christ, between Christ and God extend? What are its depth and its breadth? It is essential for us to understand this because we are called to be what Christ was, we are the body of Christ, broken for the sin of the world, we are the presence of Christ in a world which still needs salvation, which is still separated from God and divided in itself. I have used the word solidarity advisedly: it is a word of current usage, it denotes a relation with which we are quite familiar: the idea of solidarity with each other is easy for us to grasp clearly. Christ chose that two-fold solidarity which leads him to the Cross. He chose to be man in the truest and fullest sense of the word, to be a stranger to our humanity in nothing except his freedom from sin, but to belong to it utterly, because he takes upon himself the sins of the world.

Jesus at Jordan — Jesus in hell

One of the images which I find most striking, perhaps because of its inherent tragedy, is the baptism of Christ. Around St John are gathered all those who are defiled, mortally wounded by sin, they repent and ask for mercy, they want to be purified and cleansed and they plunge into the waters of Jordan and these waters wash away their sins: they come out again pure and clean, they can begin a new life. And Christ — the only one who is without sin — he too comes to be baptized. He too plunges into these waters, heavy and turbid with human mortality, human sin, human atheism, with all the evil on earth, he immerses himself in this element of death, and emerges again weighed down with the burden of this evil, this sin, this death. Baptism, which meant liberation for those who came in penitence to St John, means for him the beginning of his Passion. He is now laden with the death of others: by nature immortal, he will die a death like ours. When we think of what Christ has in common with us, we note in the Gospel certain characteristics which make him truly human: he is hungry, thirsty and tired; he has moments of depression; he weeps for Lazarus, he is angry with the merchants in the Temple, and many other things. It seems to us, finally, that he has this in common with us, that he dies as we do, and yet, it is perhaps here, in this death of his, that there is the most profound difference between him and us.

St Maximus the Confessor, in the sixth century, reflecting on the Incarnation, the passion and the death of Christ says: 'If it is true, as Scripture teaches, and as God proclaims through his prophets and apostles, that death is the fruit of sin, that man dies from the loss of God, that man dies from being no longer grafted on the source of life, then Christ, from the moment of his conception is alive and immortal. He cannot be at the same time the Living God and mortal man; even his humanity, penetrated with divinity, is beyond death, because it is united with God forever. How then does he come to die? By this act, willed and freely accepted, of solidarity with sinful man, he immerses himself in our death, he clothes himself with it, he is going to die of it. And to that end he shares all that belongs to our human destiny, not only hunger and thirst and weariness and anguish, but something more besides: have you ever given the attention of your whole heart, your whole power of feeling, to the cry which he utters from the height of the cross: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' If it is true that one dies from the absence of God, from the loss of God, then it is there that he accepts a solidarity — ultimate, agonising, appalling — with us: he undertakes to share with us the only tragedy that is final and ultimate, the loss of God which is our death. And in his death, he is torn apart. His soul, dazzling with the light of the divinity, and his body, united forever with his divinity, are separated, torn from each other; the body of Christ rests incorruptible in the tomb because it is penetrated by the presence of God, and the soul of Christ; like the soul of every man, descends into hell as we proclaim in the Apostles' Creed.

There is no longer any place where God is not

But what then is hell? Oh how different it is from the hell of Dante, from all those images that we find of the Christian hell, the place of torment! The hell of the Old Testament is something infinitely more terrible; the sheol of the Old Testament is the place of the radical absence of God, it is the place where God is not and never shall be,

and it is to that place that every human soul descends, not only the souls of sinners but also those of the just, because before Christ there is no bridge between the eternity of God and the death of man. Christ, sharing our destiny, having lost God and being dead because of it, descends to the place where every human soul that has lost God descends, and there is set the very mystery of our redemption. He descends into this hell which awaits him, this hell which he has overcome on earth at every moment and which now awaits its victim, which now knows that it is going to possess him and overcome him for ever; and suddenly this hell finds itself full of the splendor of the divinity, of the eternal and uncreated light of the Living God. It is by his death that he has conquered hell and death: there is no longer a place where God is not and to which man will be banished. Now, for the Christian, to die is to fall asleep in the Lord. Death in its utmost atrocity, as irremediable separation from God, does not exist, and that is why we sing in the Orthodox Church and why we all believe, with the joy and exultation of faith, that the death of Christ has destroyed death; not this falling asleep in the Lord, but the definitive death of separation.

The act to which Christ calls us

That is the measure of the solidarity of Christ with men: his solidarity with God was total and it was on that account that the city of men rejected him. It is because of this, because he wished to be faithful to the end, to be one with God to the end, that the city of men could only do him to death outside the walls of Jerusalem. Rejected by men, abandoned by God, yet united in solidarity with both at the cost of his life — that is the solidarity of Christ and that is the solidarity to which he calls us. It is his incarnation, his absolute solidarity with God and with man, which is the act of intercession on which a prayer of intercession is grafted, a prayer which is true because it is under-girded by the act, a prayer which is true because it expresses an act accomplished, not simply an appeal to the generosity or mercy of God, but an appeal to God under-girded by an act which cannot be forgotten or rejected by the Father who so loved the world that he gave his only Son to die for its salvation.

We are called to be in the world what Christ was. Remember the words he spoke and the mission he gave to his disciples on the evening of his resurrection: 'As my Father has sent me so I send you'. And these words, which sometimes sound like a song of victory or a trumpet blast to those of us who live in a strong world and who are apt to turn with rather ill-considered charity towards a world which is weaker, these words which send out missionaries supported by all the power of the country from which they come, these words sounded more like a knell when Christ uttered them. On Good Friday Christ was dead on the cross, on Sunday he says to them: 'I send you into the world as my Father has sent me'. The image is clear: as sheep into the midst of wolves — to give your life, to shed your blood, in order that others can believe in the love of God and be re-born in the hope of this love, and can be joined to this body of Christ which is destined, as long as the world lasts, as long as there is one sinner in the world, to crucifixion. Christ in the glory of his Father, seated at the right hand of the Father, bears in his hands and feet and side, the marks of the Passion.

When we think of those who are caught up and held in the Redemption of Christ, those who are incorporated in him, whose destiny he shared and still shares, we see that no one can be foreign or external to the mystery of Christ. He lived, a man of the Old Testament among men of the Old Testament, faithful to the law, faithful to sacrifice, faithful to all that was of divine ordinance in the house of Israel, but he has shared also, and in a way that none of us can measure, experience or know, the major tragedy of millions of men and women of our time: a loss of God so radical that one dies of it. There is no atheist in the world who has ever measured the depth of the absence of God as the Son of God made man measured it on the cross when he cried to his Father: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' The atheist does not know him, he rejects and denies him, and yet his experience as an atheist is a drop in the ocean of this loss of God which Christ knew.

Communion, commitment to the cross

The whole world and everyone in it are less than that which Christ knew of man and shared with man; having known all he can bring all back to his Father. But did he not say that he had given us an example in order that we may follow him, are we not also called to share, not only in such knowledge as the apostles had of him, but in the very life of Christ? When we receive communion in the Holy Eucharist, do we not pledge ourselves to share his human destiny as we ask to share his eternal destiny? To receive Communion surely implies the request for fellowship of life; is it not with the whole Christ that we are to enter into communion? Or shall we have the audacity to say: 'Lord, the Cross for you, the glory for me! You are dead, Lord, and I do not wish to share your cross, but I do wish to share your eternal life'.

Remember the passage in the gospel when James and John came to the Lord and asked to sit on the right hand and on the left of his throne in the day of his glory. Christ had just been speaking to them about his coming Passion; he had described it with a number of tragic details, and had concluded by saying: 'And on the third day the son of man will rise again'. And here were these two disciples who had only heard the promise of victory! They had forgotten, they had not even noticed the price of this victory. Christ had said that the son of man would be delivered into the hands of men, that he would suffer all that is revealed to us in the Passion; they never noticed that, they were only looking for his victory and for what they themselves would be able to gain by it. But Christ turns to them and says: 'Are you ready to be baptised with my baptism?' — in modern terms, (the word baptism in Greek means a total immersion) — 'Are you ready to be plunged into the horror in which I am going to be plunged, are you ready to drink the cup that I am going to drink?' They reply: 'Yes, Lord', and what does he promise them? He promises that it will be given to them to be plunged into the same horror, the same death-agony as his, for the salvation of the world, to drink to the dregs the cup that he also is going to drink. He himself is faithful, there is no need for him to promise fidelity to us, we are sure of it, the question concerns our own fidelity: 'Are you ready to be faithful to the friendship that you declare, to the love that you profess for me, to the point of sharing everything?' And whoever of us comes to the holy table to break the bread and share the Lord's cup must be ready to share not only the splendor of his eternity but also the whole of his earthly destiny, and for what? for the salvation of the

world, that others may be saved, because others will only believe in this salvation if they see the divine love shining through the disciples of Christ; they will only believe in it if they see it really crucified, given and victorious: 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do'.

In the sixth chapter of the Book of Isaiah, we see the prophet brought face to face with a vision of God, and God looking over the whole world in need of salvation, cries: 'Whom shall I send?', and Isaiah rises and says: 'Here am I, Lord, send me'. Hundreds of years later, the archangel Gabriel stands before the Virgin of Israel and tells her that the time has come for the one Job was waiting for to enter into the history of the world, in order to be living intercession, to be the intercessor par excellence. And the Virgin replies: 'Here I am, I am the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to his will'. Shall we not reply, in our turn, in the same way? Dare we be content to present God with requests for the good of others? Shall we not hear the Lord saying to us: 'Whom shall I send?' and shall we not reply: 'Here I am, Lord, send me?'.

To take upon ourselves the cross of forgiveness

Intercession begins with this act of involvement, it continues by fidelity; to be baptised with the baptism of Christ, to drink his cup, is not simply one moment of communion: it is a definitive communion, a fellowship of life accepted forever. So many examples are a proof of this and the victory of God by love and charity is so obvious when it shows itself! I will give one or two examples. Immediately after the war a German newspaper published a deeply moving document: the copy of a prayer found in a concentration camp, written on a torn scrap of wrapping paper. Briefly this was the essence of the prayer: 'Lord, when you come to judge the quick and the dead, remember not only the men of good will but those of evil will. But in that day let it not be their violence and cruelty that you remember, but those fruits of forgiveness, of companionship, of greatness of soul that we have borne because of the sufferings that they inflicted on us, and let these fruits be their pardon!' Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. A man I knew returned, having, also spent several years in a concentration camp. I met him in a street in Paris and asked him: 'What have you brought back from the camp?' 'Anguish', he replied. "'Why, have you lost your faith?' I said. 'No', he answered 'but you see, while I was in the camp, the object of violence, of ill-treatment, of cruelty, expecting a violent death at every moment, I could say: Father, forgive them, and I was sure that God must forgive them because I had the right to ask His forgiveness, for I was the innocent victim of their violence. Now I am free and perhaps they have not understood, they are still in their hatred and folly. And when I ask God for their salvation anguish seizes me: What proof can I bring to God to show that my prayer is sincere? I no longer suffer'. Father, forgive them, they know not what they do,— a prayer under-girded by an act.

We are not all in such extreme situations as those I have described, but all of us, at every moment, can take upon ourselves the cross of forgiveness. In all our human relationships, at every moment, our heart shrinks and we withdraw from our neighbour because he has wounded us, offended us, forgotten us, rejected us. We are free to open ourselves and to offer ourselves. At the very moment that we are innocent victims,

we receive from God that power which is properly divine, of pardoning in his name. And the pardon does not begin at the moment when the suffering ceases, and little by little is forgotten. Pardon begins at the moment when the victim of injustice or violence turns to the aggressor and says: 'I accept you as you are, I accept you as a danger of death, I accept you as a projection of hatred, and I take you up as Christ took up his cross, the instrument of suffering and death, and I will carry you to the end!' It is there that forgiveness begins and that our intercession begins, and in the easy situations in which almost all of us live, we can carry it out from hour to hour in refusing hatred, in refusing to be offended, in refusing to be humiliated, in refusing to be rejected, in saying; 'Whatever you do, I accept you', and then we can raise to God a prayer of intercession. And sometimes this prayer of intercession can be like that of the holy Virgin at Cana.

Opening a door to Christ

The only thing she said, and which in the event was decisive, was not that she recalled to Christ the need and hope of those who were surrounding him, it was the moment when, in an act of perfect faith, without limits, she turned to the servants and said: 'Whatever he says, do it'. She created the conditions of the kingdom of God by her act of faith which brought into that act of faith those who were still on the fringes in comparison with the perfect faith that was hers, and because she was able to believe, God was free to act. And that also is something we can do, we are all free to do it, we are all in a condition to do it. Each of us can be the one who, in a situation of tension, in a tempest, in a squall, in a confrontation, conscious of being able to do nothing, takes his stand in prayer and says: 'Lord, come! May your presence bring peace, give us that peace which the world cannot give, bless those who hate each other, give them the peace which can conquer all hatred.' Our role is to open a door to Christ; wherever there is a Christian, wherever there is a Christian community, God can be present: Christ and the Spirit, the humble frail, vulnerable All-Mightiness of this God who willed to become one of us in order that we might grow to the measure of his divinity.

Such is the Intercession that we can offer, we Christians, we modern men. An intercession which is first of all and primarily a commitment, a commitment that is total, without reserve, definitive and forever, in a solidarity that nothing will be able to break, neither the cross, nor death, nor the hatred of men, nor the loss of God. And it is an intercession that we can offer without fear of being misunderstood by a God who knows the whole mystery of commitment, of solidarity, of the anguish on the Mount of Olives, of the dereliction of the cross and of the descent into the depths of hell. Such a God as this – we can not only believe in him, we can not only hope in him, we can respect him: he is worthy of our respect, he is a God to whom we can address our prayer of intercession because he has lived the involvement of intercession far more than any one of us; we live it through sympathy but he lived it out in life and death. He has overcome and in his resurrection he witnesses to the victory which is God's and which is also ours, because the victory of God is our salvation. Amen.

* Sourozh. 1980 N.1. P. 22-33

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