

shown, however, is that being a Christian at any time calls for deep feelings for the whole of humanity and for the whole of history. Nothing is so liable to destroy this strong sense of the organic and the community than those evasive tactics which would replace the notion of holocaust with that of helping the underdog.

Writing about Prayer

GILES HIBBERT, O.P.

It is generally admitted that far too many modern books on prayer and the spiritual life are of little value. Such books often enough claim to belong to the tradition of the Church, depending upon and being continuous with the great figures of the past such as St Bernard and St John of the Cross, but in fact this dependence is merely superficial, there being a fundamental break in a process of transmission which must be essentially organic, with its roots in the past and its *life* in the present—that surely is the significance of tradition.

To claim that our thought about the nature of prayer should be up to date is not to claim that it should dissociate itself from the past—far from it. The very nature of Christian speculation is that it must give full value to and appreciate the language and thought-form in which the Church has given expression to her consciousness of the life of Christ within her throughout her history, and particularly as witnessed to by the great patristic figures and doctors of the Church. Any 'spiritual' writing which does not take cognisance of, or indeed is not dependent—whether explicitly, even whether consciously, or not—upon Saints Augustine, Gregory, Bernard, Thomas Aquinas, John of the Cross, François de Sales, not to mention the Greek Fathers of the early Church will inevitably be 'private' and therefore only by accident capable of helping the faithful in their life of prayer in the Church.

All this is straightforward, but there is another aspect which is more important. This can be summed up by saying that the spiritual life, and therefore prayer *par excellence*, is concerned with the meeting and dwelling together of God and man, and it is in this reality that lies the

'present' of the life of the Church—the leading shoot of its growth. It is modern man who meets the revealed God as presented to him in the Church here and now in the second half of the twentieth century. The return to sources, which we have just affirmed as an essential feature of the Church's authentic thought, is not a matter of putting the clock back, but rather of making the historical past live organically and dynamically into the here and now. This again is precisely what is meant by the Church's tradition—its 'handing-on'. It is thus the present which is most fundamentally our concern; and the very 'centre' of this present is man's meeting with God.

If then the meeting of man with God is to be our primary point of emphasis, it can be seen that any successful work about prayer has to consider two things, and these it has to take seriously. First of all there is God, known to us through his revelation in Jesus Christ. In other words the starting point and continual focal point must be thoroughly theological in its most profound sense. The mode of God's revelation as being the source and root of our prayer must be deeply considered. Then there is the other term—man himself, who talks with God and grows in the strength of the wisdom of the knowledge which that gives him. Man is *capax Dei*, and although the actual nature of this openness to God can be known to us only in God's revelation, nevertheless it is built or grafted upon man's nature. It is the knowledge of God which (here in this life only imperfectly through grace) gives perfection to nature. If we are going to talk about man meeting God, we have to take man's nature seriously—that is we have at least to be in tune with, and sympathetically aware of, those remarkable insights of our day (which are however not appearing now for the first time), which see man as a living vital force, living in and organically affecting through his spiritual nature, the context in which he has his being; carrying along that context creatively into the future in communion with others, making it in fact to be a living history—all this rather than trying to fit the parts and abstract pieces of a man's life together like a jig-saw puzzle. Again to do this is not to reject that philosophical thought of the past (the *philosophia perennis* after all) in which the Church has specifically put her confidence and authorized as being apt for speaking about man in relation to God. Indeed it is but to make it re-live with a fullness of life, unstintedly in the present.

It should be quite clear that these two aspects of prayer—the nature of man and the revelation of God—are not directly relevant to prayer except in as far as they are considered in their synthesis. Now the locus

of this synthesis is the Church and the life of the Church. The Church in its liturgy, its cult—using these words in their widest sense—is the source and locus of our meeting God. Thus the sacraments, so essentially linked to the ‘word’ (as well as its response) of the Church, and the traditional prayer that ‘surrounds’ them, together with the scriptures, form the essential context in which through faith and prayer that meeting attains consummation. The fact that the consciousness and theology of the Church is becoming more and more aware of the sacraments as the source of Christ-encounter and the scriptures as the revelation of the life of this encounter, rather than being in danger of representing them in quasi-legal garb on the one hand and as apologetic fact-providing material on the other, is of vast importance to the possibilities of understanding and ‘enjoyment’ of contemplative prayer; for this is simply our reaction in its fullness to what God has given to us by revelation through his Son, a reaction which although ‘ours’ and engaging our purely natural abilities is nevertheless in its essence *given*. For prayer is our supernatural life, a grace of God, just as Christ himself whom we meet is the supreme Grace of God.

Thus the nature of prayer is such that it lies at the very centre of the dynamic synthesis of all that is Christian, in the very here and now of human community and history, and thus the Church. That Dr von Balthasar realises this will not come as a surprise to any who have read his *Science, Religion and Christianity* (whose original title was most significantly *Die Gottesfrage des Heutigen Menschen*). Here in his book on prayer¹ he can be said to have fulfilled everything one would wish for and could have hoped for. This book is about contemplative prayer (its original title is *Das Betrachtende Gebet*; in English translation just *Prayer*). Now it is quite clear that contemplative prayer, for the author, means something far fuller, far more life engaging (indeed totally life engaging) than abstract speculation (which has very little if anything to do directly with prayer). Further he is concerned with what is essentially a graced activity, not pure passivity. It is equally clear that he is in no way neglecting the fact that the *Sitz-in-Leben* of prayer, both from the point of view of its source and its act, is the Church teaching, praising and sacramentally giving Christ to its members. The origin of its possibility in Christ, its actuality through the mediation of the Church itself and its relationship to the living tradition, are all shown forth with deep penetration. And it is not only as if these subjects were treated individually; they penetrate the work through and through. They

¹*Prayer*, by Hans Urs von Balthasar; Geoffrey Chapman, 30s.

make it possible to open it here and there, and everywhere to draw deeply from a well which has the full depth and content of true Catholicity.

If the language is a little turgid and perhaps heavy, it is but a very small price to pay for being given that of which there is so much need. An earlier *cri-de-coeur*² for something which takes both God and man really seriously is here in this book superbly answered.

Father Hamman's book³ thus comes at a very opportune moment. It is a superb anthology and presentation of the early prayer of the Church, covering scripture itself, the apostolic and early Fathers and martyrs of the Church, together with a great deal of early liturgical prayer. Presented with skill and pleasantly translated, it is a witness to that living spirit of the Church which is perpetually handed on—its tradition. If we approach this volume coming from Dr Balthasar's book or with a similar outlook we should be able to see these prayers as bearing that unmistakable mark of perfect authenticity—not so much timelessness but living 'modernity', or let us say more happily in French: *actualité*. It has been well worth the waiting.

²*Life of the Spirit*, May 1961, p. 523.

³*Early Christian Prayers*, by A. Hamman O.F.M.; Longmans, 35s.

Reviews

THE BIBLE IN THE AGE OF SCIENCE, by Alan Richardson; S.C.M. paperback, 5s.

Our growth as Christians is often choked by what appear to be fixed forms, a point which has recently been stressed in this periodical (Jan. 1962) in the sphere of religious education. It is common enough experience that in learning about the faith our *human* experience has frequently been trivialized because we've been given the answers before ever asking the questions, the objective formulation without the movement, the expression without the pre-supposition; the catechism, for example, without the scriptures. Yet the formulations, whether it be of catechism, preaching or books, are meant to lead us to the revelation—reality, Christ himself, and so often they merely obscure him. But, within the living Church, there are two privileged ways through which we may meet