PART SEVEN

CHRIST'S WAY TO COMPLETION IN HIM

Christ is risen! Let us follow after Him! Alleluia!

Athirst is my soul for God, the living God.
When shall I go and behold the face of God?

Christ is risen! Let us follow after Him! Alleluia!

I went with the throng and led them in procession to the house of God,
Amid loud cries of joy and thanksgiving, with the multitude keeping festival.

Christ is risen! Let us follow after Him! Alleluia!

Send forth your light and your fidelity; they shall lead me on
And bring me to your holy mountain, to your dwelling place.

Christ is risen! Let us follow after Him! Alleluia!

Then will I go to the altar of God, the God of my gladness and joy;
Then will I give thanks upon a harp, O God, my God!

Christ is risen! Let us follow after Him! Alleluia!

Psalm 42.3, 5; 43.3, 4

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: CHRISTIAN PERFECTION AND THE PRIMACY OF PRAYER

A. Introductory considerations

In part five, I articulated the ideal of Christian life--the virtues which ought to form the character of Christians and the modes of response which should form all of their actions. In part six, I described something of the awful actuality of sin, which is the only real obstacle to realizing the Christian ideal. In the present part, I am going to treat the organizing principles of the living of a Catholic life--the dynamic principles by which we can proceed from imperfection to fulfillment in Christ. These principles are prayer, the sacraments, and a Christian life integrated with prayer and the sacraments.

The present part is subject to a number of important limitations, which the reader must bear in mind throughout.

First, I offer no dogmatic treatise on prayer and the sacraments. Many of the problems which are important in such a treatise will be passed over here without so much as a mention. Moreover, the moral-canonical problems about valid and worthy administration and reception of the sacraments do not fall within my present concern, which is limited to principles. Many of these questions will be dealt with in subsequent volumes.

Second, the present part to a great extent treats matters generally studied in works on ascetical and mystical theology. My concern here is with spirituality. My approach to moral theology, however, cannot be reconciled with any clear distinction between moral theology and spirituality. Therefore, part seven must be continuous with the preceding parts; it cannot be organized and developed according to the common pattern of works on spirituality. Still, works on spirituality contain much helpful detail which does not pertain to principles. Hence, this part may appear a rather thin and impoverished treatment of spiritual theology. It will be fleshed out to some extent in volume two.

Third, Christian life truly includes the freedom of God's children. Christians are called upon to live with originality and creativity. We are not bound by hundreds of detailed precepts. Hence, there are many optional forms of spirituality which are accepted in the Catholic Church--various types of prayer, methods of meditation, forms of penance, diverse devotions, and so forth. On the whole, I am going to ignore all of this rich diversity, not because I despise it, but because it is not a matter of Christian principles. I will concentrate on the common spirituality which the Church herself provides for all of her children, and especially upon those aspects of it which she proposes as obligatory.

A final limitation upon this part of the work arises from my own background and remote preparation for the present work. In philosophical moral reflection, one never discusses prayer and the sacraments. In my own theological thinking, I have concentrated on a number of other topics, all of which have been treated in previous parts of this volume. Therefore, the theological subject matter of the present part is rather remote from anything I have written before. As an initial effort, this part is likely to require more thorough criticism from others and more careful revision by myself than any other part of this volume.

The plan of the present part is as follows. In this chapter I will articulate what Christian perfection in this life is--in other words, what is necessary to fulfill the command: "Be perfect" (cf. Mt 5.48). Then I will discuss prayer in general and certain types of prayer and problems concerning it. In chapter thirty-two, I will treat the sacraments in general, both insofar as they are a form of worship shaped by liturgical prayer and insofar as they are human acts in cooperation with God's redemptive act. I also will treat baptism, by which one enters the Christian life and begins to grow toward maturity in it. In chapter thirty-three, I will treat confirmation as a principle of Christian life, the task of organizing one's life as a profession of one's faith, and the special instance of the priestly life. In chapter thirty-four, I will treat the sacraments of reconciliation and anointing as organizing principles of Christian life, the need for and types of self-denial, and such incidentally related topics as purgatory and indulgences. In chapter thirty-five, I will treat the Eucharist as the most important principle of Christian life; I will stress its role in the formation of the Church as well as of the individual. In the same chapter, I will treat the Liturgy of the Hours and matrimony, each of which in its own way extends the Eucharist throughout daily life.

My treatment of prayer will not be limited to the present chapter; it will be expanded in certain sections in every chapter of the present part.

B. What is the perfection to which Christians are called in this life?

As Vatican II teaches, every Christian is called to holiness of life, which is the perfection possible in this life (cf. LG 40-42). Charity is the heart of this perfection:

> The Lord Jesus, the divine Teacher and Model of all perfection, preached holiness of life to each and every one of His disciples, regardless of their situation: "You therefore are to be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5.48). He Himself stands as the Author and Finisher of this holiness of life. For He sent the Holy Spirit upon all men that He might inspire them from within to love God with their whole heart and their whole soul, with all their mind and all their strength (cf. Mk 12.30) and that they might love one another as Christ loved them (cf. Jn 13.34; 15.12) (LG 40).

Charity, however, excludes no human good, but rather requires the cultivation of every good of the human person: "By this holiness a more human way of life is promoted even in this earthly society" (LG 40). From her children, the Church desires an "abundant harvest of good" (LG 40).

Charity is the heart of Christian perfection, but it must be bodied out by prayer, the sacraments, and a morally good life shaped by these principles:

"God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him" (1 Jn 4.16). God pours out His love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us (cf. Rom 5.5). Thus the first and most necessary gift is that charity by which we love God above all things and our neighbor because of God. If that love, as good seed, is to grow and bring forth fruit in the soul, each one of the faithful must willingly hear the Word of God and with the help of His grace act to fulfill His will.

Each must share frequently in the sacraments, the Eucharist especially, and in liturgical rites. Each must apply himself constantly to prayer, self-denial, active brotherly service, and the exercise of all the virtues. For charity, as the bond of perfection and the fulfillment of the law (cf. Col 3.14; Rom 13.10), rules over all the means of attaining holiness, gives life to them, and makes them work. Hence it is the love of God and of neighbor which points out the true disciple of Christ (LG 42).

The love which is at the heart of Christian life is not sentiment or sympathy, nor is it a mysterious something hidden in the depths of one's inner self. Rather, it is the disposition to total fulfillment in divine and human life. Charity rules all of the means of attaining holiness, because it organizes and enlivens the whole of Christian life, and this very living and flourishing whole <u>is</u> holiness.

The perfection of Christian life is perfection of the whole interpersonal relationship with God, with other persons, and with the remainder of creation. This relationship is initiated by divine revelation and by the human response of faith. God initiates a friendship with creatures; holiness is the blossoming of this friendship. In this blossoming, nothing of divine goods is held back by God, and nothing of created goods is held back by those who love Him. All of one's life, all society, everything good, beautiful, and true must be drawn into the circle of this friendship.

The idea that the perfection to which Christians are called in this life is exclusively spiritual and religious--the notion that holiness has little to do with the body, with outward behavior, and with secular human goods--is radically mistaken. Indeed, this idea is at war with Christianity, which is centered upon the divine Son, our Lord Jesus, the Word made flesh, our very brother. Moreover, even in His own being, God is no more immaterial than bodily; He is beyond all such limited categories.

Hence, holiness cannot be separated from love of neighbor; one can find oneself only by giving oneself (cf. GS 24). Christian perfection demands the building up of this world by fruitful activity (cf. GS 34). Because love is the law of human perfection love demands the transformation of this world (cf. GS 38). The perfection of this life must include human goods, for here and now we "make ready the material of the celestial realm" (GS 38).

Christian love is not a purely interior relationship of the "soul" to God, as I have explained in chapter eighteen, sections A and B. Love is an abiding in Christ by which one lives in communion with the Holy Trinity; love also is doing to others as Jesus does to us.

Apart from Christianity, the noblest conceptions of human perfection were that human persons are destined either to lose themselves in absolute being, or to fulfill themselves exclusively by gazing upon perfect beauty (the proposals of the Buddha and of Socrates respectively). But in Jesus the mystery of humankind takes on new light. Jesus, "by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear" (GS 22). For Jesus makes clear that the new law of love can be fulfilled by the Spirit's power, that human persons are called to integral human and divine fulfillment in Christ, that the way to this fulfillment requires love and service also of bodily goods, that the way leads through death to resurrection, and that heavenly fulfillment will save and enhance individuality and every aspect of human potentiality.

C. <u>How does charity grow toward perfection?</u>

The starting point of humankind's relationship with God is the reception of His revelation with living faith. By faith one is moved toward God, by love one is disposed to fulfillment in His goodness, and by hope one confidently relies upon Him to bring one to fulfillment. Faith, hope, and charity are not three separate acts; rather, as I explained in chapter thirteen, section E, they are three aspects of one complete act.[1] For this reason, in its teaching on perfection, Vatican II teaches: "Every person should walk unhesitatingly according to his own personal gifts and duties in the path of a living faith which arouses hopes and works through charity" (LG 41).

Insofar as it is formed by living faith, the whole of Christian life essentially is religious; insofar as it is lived in submission to God, the whole of Christian life essentially is a living sacrifice (cf. Rom 12.1-2), as I explained in chapter twelve, section L.

Considered in itself, the love of God which is poured forth in the heart of a Christian is not subject to more or less. One either is a child of God or not; one either shares in the divine nature or one does not; one either abides in the love of the Lord Jesus or one does not. But love is a principle of joy and of desire, and joy and desire lead to expressions and actions. When we consider the divine goodness already realized in God Himself and in the creation in which He pours it forth, we rejoice; our joy leads us to praise and thanksgiving. When we consider the divine goodness still to be realized in its participations, when God is all in all, then we desire the good yet to be and detest the evil which blocks it; our desire of good and hatred of evil leads us to petition and contrition.

Every act based upon the desire and joy which flow from charity is an act which builds up friendship with God, an act of religion. The primary act of religion which pervades all others is the will to do what God wills one to do. Love of God most centrally means this: conformity to His will. St. John of the Cross makes clear that really Christian mysticism is nothing but this: the union which "exists when God's will and the soul's are in conformity, so that nothing in the one is repugnant to the other."[2]

It follows that the growth of charity toward perfection is nothing else than growth in moral goodness out of charity. The Council of Trent makes this point clear:

> Therefore, in this way the justified become both friends of God and members of his household (cf. Jn 15.15; Eph 2.19), advancing from virtue to virtue (cf. Ps 83.8), renewed, as the Apostle says, day by day (cf. 2 Cor 4.16), that is, by mortifying the members of their flesh (cf. Col 3.5) and showing them as weapons of justice (cf. Rom 6.13, 19) unto sanctification by observing the commandments of God and of the Church. When faith works along with their works (cf. Jas 2.22), the justified increase in the very justice which they have received through the grace of Christ and are justified the more (cf. DS 1574/834; 1582/842), as it is written: "He who is just, let him be just still" (Rev 22.11), and again: "Fear not to be justified even to death" (Sir 18.22), and again: "You see that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only" (Jas 2.24). Indeed, the holy Church begs this increase of justice when she prays: "O Lord, give us an increase of faith, hope, and charity" (DS 1535/803).[3]

To seek perfection in Christian life is to seek to do every act one does as a morally good act informed by living faith--to do everything for the glory of God (cf. 1 Cor 10.31), to try always to contribute here and now to the fulfillment of everything in Christ, and so to merit a share in this fulfillment (cf. DS 1545-1549/809-810).

The twofold table, the Word of God and the sacraments, prayer and the Eucharist--these two kinds of acts are fundamental to everything else in Christian life (cf. PO 18, PC 6, DV 21). In performing one's duties--whatever they are, provided that one's commitments are upright--one grows in union with Christ, and so grows toward perfection, nourished always by the acts of prayer and sacramental worship which center in one's active participation in the sacred liturgy (cf. AA 4).

Perhaps the best brief statement which exists of the Christian way of perfection is that set down by St. Paul:

> Because you are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved,
> clothe yourselves with heartfelt mercy,
> with kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.
> Bear with one another; forgive whatever grievances you have against one another.
> Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you.
> Over all these virtues put on love,
> which binds the rest together and makes them perfect.
> Christ's peace must reign in your hearts,
> since as members of the one body you have been called to that peace.
> Dedicate yourselves to thankfulness.
> Let the word of Christ, rich as it is, dwell in you.
> In wisdom made perfect, instruct and admonish one another.
> Sing gratefully to God from your hearts in psalms, hymns, and inspired songs.
> Whatever you do, whether in speech or in action,
> do it in the name of the Lord Jesus.
> Give thanks to God the Father through him (Col 3.12-17).

First Paul commends the Christian modes of response; one must be clothed with all of these virtues. Above all, one must safeguard charity, the gift of the Spirit; one must remain in the peace of Christ by avoiding mortal sin. One must permit God's word to form one's heart in prayer, and communicate the fruits of one's prayer to others. One must express one's inner prayer outwardly, not only in vocal prayer and song, but also in all of one's behavior. In this way one gives thanks to God; one offers Him as a living sacrifice all that one is--a human person living as fruitfully as possible.

D. Perfection especially to be sought by bishops and priests

The Code of Canon Law (Canon 124) states as the first obligation of clerics that they ought to lead a holier interior and outward life than laypeople; bishops and priests should provide a model of Christian virtue and upright life. Those in Holy Orders are gifted with a certain priority in the order of charity; as a consequence, they are bound to follow our Lord Jesus more closely along the hard trail which He has blazed by His passion and death toward fulfillment in His resurrection.

This closer following of Christ is the first service a priest or bishop must provide his people. If he provides no other service, still he does well. And no matter what other service he provides, if he fails to provide this one, his entire life and ministry is a failure. The reason why this service is so essential is that people need an example. Christian life is hard; people must see by the performance of their leaders that it nevertheless is possible, and that it can even be joyous.

Moreover, whether he is holy or not, whether he strives for holiness or relaxes in his imperfection, the bishop and the priest by virtue of his office proclaims the Gospel daily. How credible can this proclamation be if the life of the priest does not confirm by deeds the words he utters? This is why the Church commands those who proclaim the Gospel not only to believe it but also to live it out.

Yet very many bishops and priests are marked by laziness, self-indulgence, and arrogance which make clerical life appear to the laity more as membership in a rather comfortable and self-serving club than as a model of dedication to Christ and His Church. Why are many seminarians less dedicated to study than are men and women preparing for any other profession? Why do most bishops and many priests live far more comfortably than their people? Why do so many priests and even bishops deal carelessly with the liturgy, as if the word of God and the sacraments were their personal possessions instead of precious divine gifts entrusted to the care of clerics for the common good of the whole people of God?[4]

I think that Vatican II provides an answer to these questions when it teaches especially concerning the holiness of clerical life. This holiness is to be gained by dedicated carrying out of the ministry proper to the cleric. In other words, the immediate object of a priest's work ought not to be his personal satisfaction in his work, nor even his personal salvation as such. The former he should forget about; the latter he

should strive for by fulfilling his vocation of service to others (cf. PO 12). Clerics ought to preserve the bond of priestly fraternity, but they ought not to make clerical life into the life of a fraternity. Priests must center their lives on Christ and must imitate Him (cf. PO 14). In particular, the models for priestly life should not be the defective ones immediately available; instead, the commended models are priests who are saints--"those priests who have lived during the course of centuries, often in lowly and hidden service, and have left behind them a bright pattern of holiness" (LG 41).

In other words, St. Paul, St. Vincent de Paul, St. John Vianney, St. Philip Neri, St. Peter Claver, St. John Neumann, and the like--there are far too many to mention--ought to be the models of the seminarian and the priest, not their own friendly but far less exemplary bishops, seminary professors, pastors, fellow curates, and fellow students, except to the extent that these in some ways provide the good example they should.

Most professions are highly competitive. Physicians, lawyers, scholars try to outdo one another in performance. Their drive is kindled by a desire for earthly glory. The clerical profession is almost entirely noncompetitive; bishops and priests cover up one another's faults and discourage one another from performing at a level of excellence which would set too high a mark. Yet bishops and priests ought to be striving for heavenly glory (cf. 1 Cor 9.25; 2 Tm 2.5). How many would dare to say with St. Paul: "From now on a merited crown awaits me; on that Day the Lord, just judge that he is, will award it to me" (2 Tm 4.8)?

Pius XII, 23 September 1950, published a beautiful apostolic exhortation to the clergy of the entire world. In it he deals at length with the topic I have been considering briefly in the present section. But he also summarizes the heart of the matter in powerful words:

> The priestly life, since it arises from Christ, should always and in everything be directed towards Him. Christ is the Word of God and did not disdain to assume human nature. He lived a life on earth in order to obey the will of the Eternal Father. He spread around Himself the fragrance of the lily. He lived in poverty, and "went about doing good and healing all" (Acts 10.38). Finally, He offered Himself as a victim for the salvation of His brothers. That, beloved sons, is the summary of the wonderful life proposed to you. Strive with all your strength to reproduce it in yourselves and recall His words of exhortation: "For I have given you an example, that as I have done to you, so you also should do" (Jn 13.15).[5]

These words are as valid today as they were when they were first published, and they will remain so permanently, for they do nothing but apply the truth of the Gospel to the life of the priest.

Every seminarian ought to study the whole of this exhortation as well as the document of Vatican II (PO) on the priestly life and ministry. If only a small part of the men who are studying now and during the next few years were to take these words to heart and do their best to cooperate with God's grace in living them, then the Spirit of God invoked by John XXIII and Vatican II would no longer be stifled. Given docile instruments, His power would renew the Church and by it the face of the earth.

E. Some serious errors to be avoided in thinking about progress toward perfection

Perhaps the most basic mistake made by people who are wholly orthodox and well intentioned is to think of holiness as something which is to be worked for only in certain special areas of life--for example, in prayer and in pious practices. However, charity, which is the heart of holiness, is a divine gift. Perfection does not consist in acquiring charity, but in integrating the whole of one's life with the charity poured forth in one's heart by the Holy Spirit. Prayer, the sacraments, and other specifically religious acts are vital principles of this integration. But no part of one's life can be regarded as a free area; nothing can be withheld from the purging and transforming fire of God's love.

Because prayer, the sacraments, and various pious practices mediate between charity and all the rest of one's being, these specifically religious acts often and rightly are called "means of grace"; they mediate God's gifts to one's whole mind, one's whole heart, one's whole soul, and one's whole power of action. However, the expression "means of grace" often is misunderstood in two ways.

First, sometimes Catholics have tended to think that religious acts precisely as human acts cause grace. This is an error to which Luther and others rightly took violent exception, but it is not the error of Catholic teaching itself. As I will explain in chapter thirty-two, the true Catholic position is that the sacraments contain and confer grace because God has provided them as cooperative acts by which we can share in the redemptive work which primarily is the doing of the Holy Spirit.

Second, very often Catholics have thought of prayer, the sacraments, and other specifically religious acts as means as if they were mere means--tools which are not built into the work, stages in the process which fall away before it reaches fruition. This view is false; I have shown why it is false in part two, especially chapter seven, sections J through M. Prayer is the basis of one's personal relationship with God; it is no more a mere means than sexual intercourse is a mere means for the cultivation of conjugal love. The Eucharist contains Christ and fulfillment in Him; only the appearances to the contrary need drop away. And the same thing is true by analogy of every "means" of grace.

No doubt the most serious mistake one can make is to think that one can do anything whatsoever to attain holiness which is not first, last, and always God's gift. The whole of Christian life is based upon divine self-revelation; this communication is utterly gratuitous, and in no way required by our created nature for its proper integrity and proportionate fulfillment (except insofar as fallen humankind can attain fulfillment only by a grace which deifies at the same time that it heals). The gift of this communication can be received by humankind and by each person only because of God's gift of the incarnation of the Word and sending of the Spirit. And each person who begins and ends in holiness does so only because of God's loving predestination (cf. Rom

7.29-30; Eph 1.3-6)--an essential point of Catholic teaching too often ignored since the Reformation distorted it.

Anything which we do that increases our own holiness is itself a special gift of God to us. Growth in perfection which is our work is no less God's grace (cf. DS 1545-1546/809). Indeed, the reason why we can do something is that God wishes His gifts also to be our merits (cf. DS 248/141, 1548/810). He not only wants to give us fulfillment in divine life; He also wants us to have this fulfillment in a way which will fulfill us as human persons, in a way which ennobles us by making use of our own capacities, in a way which fully respects us by appealing to our own intelligence and freedom.

In some cases, a growth in holiness is more obviously God's gift than it is in other cases: "'in weakness power reaches perfection'" (2 Cor 12.9). When acts cannot be elicited at will, but come about spontaneously, then one is more conscious of their character as graces. Yet the most competent work one does in carrying out one's Christian vocation is no less a gift of God than is the miraculous outcome which crowns one's best but failing effort; the first lisped prayer of the child, if it is sincere, is no less a grace of contemplation than is the supreme mystical experience of a John of the Cross.

Clarity about this point should block any temptation to quietism--that is, the erroneous attitude that grace perfects sloth. Progress toward holiness is entirely grace. For this very reason it is our work too. Our relationship with God must be cultivated by prayer; the seed of God's word must be pondered in our hearts. In ways that God has made possible for us, we must cooperate in His redeeming and deifying act; this cooperation centers in the doing of the sacraments, by which we also join with Christ in returning to the Father the praise and thanksgiving He deserves. Finally, we must live our whole lives in the light of living faith--that is, we must live lives formed by prayer and organized by the sacraments.

One progresses toward perfection by the means of holiness God has provided. Yet these means are in no sense to be regarded as techniques. Holiness is in no sense a human product. Our part is to pursue human goods and to deal with evil as best we can. The pursuit of human goods ought first but not exclusively to be the pursuit of the human good of friendship with God. Evil is dealt with by healing and integrating love, in union with the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus.

It is noteworthy that He constantly faced the demand that He be an effective messiah, but He rejected this demand and accepted the role of the Suffering Servant (cf. Mk 8.27-39; Mt 16.13-28; Lk 9.18-27). Like Him we must use the strength and breath God gives us to go about doing good to the extent that we can, but in the end freely accept suffering and death--unlike Him, first for our own redemption, and only then for the redemption of others. God gives the glory.

F. What is prayer and why is it primary among Christian acts?

The origin of Christianity is in God's self-revelation, by which He makes Himself known and offers an intimate share in His own life. Even before one hears God's word, one might be moved by the grace of the Spirit to listen for it and, as it were, to be aware of the awesome silence which envelopes this whole world and the constant talk and noise of life in it. Once the word of God is proclaimed to people and they hear it, however, they become able to make their first contribution to the relationship--namely, to listen. To listen is more than to hear; it is to hear receptively, with an active passivity. Such listening is the beginning of prayer, and real prayer never exists without it. For all Christian prayer essentially is hearing, thinking over, and responding to God's word.

St. Francis de Sales summarizes the teaching of the Fathers on prayer. They often use the word "prayer" in a narrow sense to signify petition, but also in a wider sense, to mean all the acts of contemplation--"contemplation" meaning loving thought of any sort about divine realities. Two formulae have become classic; one of them defines prayer as a conference or conversation or discussion with God, while the other defines it as a lifting of the mind and heart to God. De Sales seems to prefer the former of these definitions, for he comments:

> If prayer is a colloquy, a discussion, or a conversation of the soul with God, then by prayer we speak to God and God in turn speaks to us. We aspire to him and breath in him; he reciprocally inspires us and breaths in us.[6]

It seems to me that this conception defines prayer more adequately than that which stresses only the human act of ascent toward God. However, one must be careful to remember that God is holy and infinite in majesty; familiar conversation must not be permitted to breed irreverence.

As Vatican II points out, prayer and the reading of Scripture go together, for the former is the human side and the latter God's side of one and the same conversation. When we read the Scriptures we listen to God and when we pray we respond to Him, as Ambrose says (cf. DV 25). Thus, just as "talking" in one sense refers only to one's own part in a conversation, but in another sense ("talking with") refers also to listening, so "prayer" in one sense refers only to one's own part in communication with God, but in another sense refers also to hearing, pondering, and assimilating what He has revealed.

To a great extent prayer consists in remembering--remembering what God has said and done, especially remembering what He has made known and available to us in Jesus. For one's sense of one's identity, the holding of many things in one's heart is essential; one who loses memory thereby loses his or her very self. This general truth no less applies to one's identity as a child of God; faith is a holding fast to gifts received.

At the same time, one knows one's identity in living it out. This truth, too, applies to faith: "A man who listens to God's word but does not put it into practice is like a man who looks into a mirror at the face he was born with; he looks at himself, then goes off and promptly forgets what he looked like" (Jas 1.23-24). Hence, prayer also projects Christian life; it shapes action in accord with living faith. Thus prayer is the principle of continuity by which one's past relationship with God is kept fresh and made to yield still more abundant fruit of peace and joy.

As to the necessity of prayer, one can rightly notice that Scripture commands as

well as commends prayer (cf. Mt 7.7, 26.41; Lk 18.1; 1 Thess 5.17; Col 4.2; and so on). However, one also should grasp the profound reason for this precept. Scripture and the Holy Eucharist are paired together as two tables of the New Law; they are two forms in which the Word of God comes to us (cf. DV 21, 25, 26; AA 6). God's words and His acts together give us Himself in personal wholeness. Hence our side of the relationship requires prayer just as much as it requires reception of the Eucharist, since by both of these acts we consume the bread which has come down from heaven.

St. Francis de Sales uses a metaphor: Prayer and the sacraments are two sides of a ladder reaching to heaven. Prayer calls down God's love and the sacraments confer it. The rungs are the various degrees of charity by which one moves from virtue to virtue, either ascending toward union with God or descending again with help for one's neighbors.[7]

One might explain the necessity of prayer by analogy with the interpersonal relationships of husband and wife. Their whole common life depends upon mutual understanding, and this understanding demands conversation. Nor can this conversation always be directed toward some practical object. Sometimes they must converse simply to commune with one another; this communing normally sometimes reaches a peak in the play of love. Such play is possible within limits even for those who for some reason should not engage in sexual intercourse. Marriage requires such communing; therefore, Christian life requires prayer.

G. Further considerations on the necessity of prayer

Acts of prayer are human acts. By such acts one fulfills oneself. One also determines oneself. These acts last. They build up one's Christian personality. The publican and the pharisee not only pray as they do because of what they are; they are what they are because they pray as they do. The former really prays; the latter self-consciously mutters theorems of a prayerless theology. For the pharisee, religion is a means to an end. For the publican, religion is friendship with God; prayer is part of this friendship, which is good in itself. As a man and woman become husband and wife more and more perfectly by constant, loving communion, so human persons and the indwelling Trinity become united more and more perfectly by constant prayer.

Because prayer is a fulfilling human act, it ought not to be engaged in as if it were labor nor as if it were bitter medicine to be taken in small doses only for the sake of its health-giving effects. Like play, prayer is essentially a leisurely activity, something worth doing for its own sake and joyful regardless of ulterior consequences. However, the leisurely character of prayer does not mean it should be playful in the sense that one should engage in it only when and as long as one finds it pleasant, nor that one may engage in it in a casual and slipshod manner. If one ought to be conscientious in labor and should take pride in work well done, even when it is done for some ulterior end, how much more ought one to be conscientious in the best form of leisure activity and seek to do it well and with style? (If more priests in the old days had paid as much attention to their style of praying as to their style of playing golf or bridge. . ..)

"Prayer" in the narrow sense refers to prayer of petition; the Lord's prayer is a series of requests.[8] Petition and thanks naturally go together; one who asks must thank for what already has been received and thank in advance for the next, hoped for gift, while one who willingly and gratefully receives gifts readily asks for further gifts. Both asking God for all that one needs and thanking Him for all that He gives are essential consequences of the childlike attitude which belongs to Christian humility, an attitude discussed in chapter twenty, section E. One might say that prayer is necessary to receive the goods God wills to give precisely <u>because</u> by this act one determines oneself into an attitude of humility--one holds out one's hand to accept (cf. Mk 7.24-30, 9.14-29).

If Christians try to engage in activity of any sort without forming it by prayer, their efforts are likely to have several bad results upon their relationship with God. First, being aware of one's own input, one loses humility, and self-gratification in the activity rapidly dominates, so that one ceases to serve others and quickly begins to use them. Second, being interested in what one is doing, one has definite goals and a passionate drive to succeed in attaining them; without prayer, one will lose meekness, and so will shunt others aside and become angry and discouraged in the face of any obstacles. Third, the effort of activity demands recreation; if one does not find it in prayer, one is tempted to find it in self-indulgent escapism, thinking that one is entitled to compensation for all the good one is doing. Fourth, one will take success or failure much too seriously; one will fail to realize that even the most important work, such as pastoral activity, belongs to this passing world, and that the real treasure is elsewhere. Fifth, one will fail to form one's action by faith; one will become fixated on particular objectives and will become fanatical, seeking one's own kingdom and justice rather than God's.

God's wisdom and love, most perfectly revealed in the life of Jesus, is the model of Christian life as well as its motive and goal. To conform to this model, one must examine it closely and make it one's own; one must put on the mind of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 2.16; Phil 2.5; Rom 13.14). One begins to do this by prayer and completes the task by carrying out in practice what one has come to understand in prayer. This is why every method of meditation leads to a practical resolution; the principle is valid even if the approach is rather programmed.

Precisely because one aspect of the necessity of prayer is its primary role in the self-determination of each Christian personality, the liturgy, which is the common, public prayer of the Church is not by itself adequate for any particular person. There must be private prayer and devotions apart from the liturgy, in order to specify what is common to all for oneself, in order to personally assimilate the bread from heaven which is the nourishment in the first place of the whole Mystical Body.[9]

Vatican II has emphasized this point (cf. SC 9, 12, and 13). Unfortunately, all too often it has been ignored or soft-pedalled during the postconciliar period. To the extent that this has happened, there has been a tendency for the liturgy itself to suffer,

either by its retreating once more into isolation and sterility, or (much more often) by its being taken over as a medium of emotional and self-serving personal and communal expression.

One who understands how prayer determines a person into a proper disposition to receive God's gifts will not complain that he or she gets little or nothing out of praying in certain ways which the Church prescribes or strongly commends. Children often quit listening to their parents when they no longer find the experience gratifying. But in many cases, precisely at this point children would get a great deal out of listening. How sad it is that they miss so much wisdom and love because they are unwilling to make the unpleasant adjustment necessary to accept it!

H. The centrality of Jesus in Christian prayer

Christian prayer is prayer with, through, and in Jesus. As incarnate Word and our high priest, our Lord brings heavenly conversation to earth. "He joins the entire community of mankind to Himself, associating it with His own singing of this canticle of divine praise" (SC 83). Jesus is both the model and the principle of our prayer.[10] Jesus teaches us to pray (cf. Lk 11.1); His Spirit in us makes us do so with the familiarity He taught us to use (cf. Rom 8.15; Gal 4.6). One reaches the Father through Jesus, not otherwise (cf. Jn 14.6; Rom 5.2; Eph 2.18, 3.12). The conclusion of the Canon of the Mass--"Through him, with him, in him"--is most fitting, since the Canon is the central prayer of Christian life.

The General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours provides a beautiful chain of references to the New Testament which illustrate the abundance of Jesus' personal prayer.[11] Jesus prayed often. His daily work flowed from prayer. He also took part in public prayers and used the standard forms of prayer--for instance at meals. His supreme decision by which He accepted death was formed and executed in prayer as an offering to the Father (cf. Jn 17; Heb 5.7).

Jesus commands us to pray (cf. Mt 5.44, 7.7, 26.41; Mk 13.33, 14.38; Lk 6.28, 10.2, 11.9, 22.40, 46). St. Augustine most beautifully summarizes the centrality of Jesus in Christian prayer:

> God could give no greater gift to mankind than to give them as their head the Word through whom he created all things, and to unite them to him as his members, so that he might be Son of God and Son of man, one God with the Father, one man with men. So, when we speak to God in prayer we do not separate the Son from God, and when the body of the Son prays it does not separate its head from itself, but it is the one savior of his body, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who himself prays for us, and prays in us, and is the object of our prayer. He prays for us as our priest, he prays in us as our head, he is the object of our prayer as our God. Let us then hear our voices in his voice, and his voice in ours.[12]

Without Jesus we can do nothing (cf. Jn 15.4). Without prayer, one is without Jesus, since Christian life is sharing in His redeeming work, and His redeeming work is wholly formed by prayer.

I. What characteristics ought to mark Christian prayer?

Christian prayer must first of all be humble (cf. Lk 18.9-14). Humility is so necessary because without it one is not ready to accept the gifts which God always is trying to give. One imagines that one can do without them. One does not hold out one's hand, but then nothing can be given to fill it.

Prayer must be vigilant and attentive (cf. Lk 21.36; Mk 13.33; Col 4.2). Otherwise, it rapidly deteriorates into a mere exercise, which makes little difference to one's heart. St. Benedict's dictum with respect to the Liturgy of the Hours (cf. SC 90), that one's mind should be attuned to one's voice, is valid for all prayer. Without attention one merely goes through motions.

Christian prayer also must be persevering and confident in the goodness of our Father (cf. Lk 11.5-13; 18.1-8; Jn 14.13, 16.23; Rom 12.12; 1 Pt 4.7). One cannot expect gifts unless one really wants them and is truly willing to accept them. One who does not persevere in asking is not very eager to receive. Similarly, one who really means words of high praise repeats them over and over. Husbands and wives who love one another do not tire of saying so. Perseverance is essential in prayer because prayer is interpersonal communion, and the communion is meant to last forever.

Christian prayer must be sincere, not for show (cf. Mt 6.5-8; Lk 20.47). The authentic prayer is offered to God in spirit and in truth (cf. Jn 4.23). In Christian prayer children of God converse with their Father; such conversation calls for privacy for an individual or a certain apartness for a group, so that the prayer-act does not become a performance for those who do not participate in it. In view of this requirement, one easily sees how alien to the spirit of prayer is any liturgical development which makes the carrying out of the sacred acts into an artistic performance or spectacle, directed more <u>toward</u> a congregation as audience than <u>from</u> an assembled people of God to their Lord.

Christian prayer should be filled with a spirit of joyous thanks. This requirement is emphasized especially by St. Paul (cf. Eph 5.4; Phil 4.6; Col 2.7, 4.2; 1 Thess 5.18; 1 Tm 2.1, 4.3-5). Paul begins his letters with thanks to God (cf. Rom 1.8; 1 Cor 1.4-5; and so on). The necessity for gratitude follows from the requirement of humility together with the fact that with the resurrection of Jesus, those who are united with Him already have much to be thankful for. Christian prayer is formed by the conviction that Jesus is alive and well, and that He will come back soon to finish what He has begun.

Jesus Himself teaches that prayer should be constant (cf. Lk 18.1). This precept was followed by the early Church (cf. Acts 2.42). It was renewed by St. Paul (cf. 1 Thess 5.17; Rom 12.12; Eph 6.18; Phil 4.6; Col 4.2). Beyond the requirement of perseverance in prayer, what can this demand for constancy be taken to mean?

Some have urged that the requirement is that one engage continuously in explicit acts of prayer--or an explicit state of prayerful awareness--at least at the margin of

one's consciousness. Various methods have been developed in an effort to attain this objective. St. Thomas realistically rejects this idea. One can only give one's full attention to one thing at a time, and Christian life includes many acts besides prayer which ought to be given their due. However, one can maintain a constant desire to be in communion with God when an appropriate opportunity offers; one can avoid missing prayers; one can keep alive between times the devotion nourished during periods of prayer; one can pray through the prayer of others, as by benifices and stipends, and by sharing in the constant, liturgical prayer of the whole Church.[13]

To all of these ways in which prayer can be constant without its becoming a constant distraction from other important activities, one can add the true sense to the adage: To work is to pray. Not all work is prayer. But when one's work carries out in fact the will of God which one has discerned and accepted with loving firmness in prayer, then indeed to work is to pray, and to fail to give one's whole heart and attention to one's work is to abort one's prayer.

J. The problem of petitionary prayer

Usually the problem of petitionary prayer is framed by the simple question: Are our prayers always answered? The question arises because, on the one hand, we are promised that they will be. Jesus says: "Whoever asks, receives" (Lk 11.10) and "Ask and you shall receive" (Jn 16.24). But, on the other hand, we often ask and ask in His name, yet do not receive what we ask for. It might be a partial answer to this difficulty to say that one has not yet prayed long enough. But sometimes this answer is irrelevant. For example, parents pray for the safety of their children--surely a legitimate request--yet sometimes children die in accidents.

The solution to this difficulty is along the following lines. God is a loving Father. He does hear and answer our prayers. St. John says:

> We have this confidence in God: that he hears us whenever we ask for anything according to his will. And since we know that he hears us whenever we ask, we know that what we ask him for is ours (1 Jn 5.14-15).

Small children like sweets. They ask all day long for candy, cookies, ice cream, and soft drinks. A wise parent does not ignore these requests and realizes that the child both is hungry and needs gratification. But the parent does not satisfy every request for sweets; the child would become overweight yet malnourished and would have rotten teeth. So the parent provides a balanced diet and offers forms of gratification, such as cuddling, which are harmless.

The principle was at work in Jesus' own prayer and the Father's way of answering it. Jesus prayed that the cup of suffering might pass Him by (cf. Mt 26.39-44). But He was crucified. He did not obtain precisely what He wanted. Yet He had couched His request in conditional form, as St. John says we should: "'Still, let it be as you would have it, not as I'" (Mt 26.39). One who loves God prays first of all: "'Your will be done'" (Mt 6.10). Thus the apostolic writer can say of Jesus and His prayer: "In the days when he was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to God, who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence" (Heb 5.7). The passion and death of Jesus was not prevented; He was not saved from death in the precise way He requested. Yet He was saved from death: "'He has been raised from the dead and now goes ahead of you. . .'" (Mt 28.7).

We must trust that God deals similarly with our requests. When they are not granted in the specific form in which they are made, still the safety and well-being of those for whom we pray will be adequately secured provided only that they come to fulfillment in Christ, in which every human good will be enjoyed together with the blessed vision of God.

This solution to the usual problem about petitionary prayer, however, only leads to a more fundamental and metaphysical difficulty. Does not the rule of asking according to God's will render prayer nugatory? As Jesus Himself says, God already knows what we need (cf. Mt 6.32). Besides, the providence of God embraces everything, and His will of all the good which will be done antecedes our own upright desires (cf. Wis 11.20-22; Rom 11.33-36).

St. Thomas answers this difficulty by saying that our prayers do not alter God's plans but rather fulfill them. God not only has disposed that goods be given us, but that they be given in answer to our prayers. Thus our prayers also are part of the providential design; God wills them so that we ourselves might have a share in bringing about even the work of His hands.[14]

This answer seems to me to be sound provided that it is not misunderstood. Prayer, as I already have explained, is an essential and basic dimension of our interpersonal relationship with the divine Persons. By prayer acts we form ourselves into the relationship and begin to make our proper contribution to the bond of friendship. The realism of this relationship must not be undercut by a metaphysical thesis that God is all-knowing and unchanging. Ignorance or error and change of any sort certainly must be excluded from God. But so also must be excluded any sort of comprehensive knowledge and unalterability which we can understand. If we make the mistake of thinking that God is all-knowing and unchanging in some sense we can fathom, then prayer indeed would be pointless. The presumption that we know what God is must be firmly set aside, and His utter mysteriousness kept in mind, as I have explained in chapter one, sections C and E. We do not know what God is in Himself, but we can be sure that we are right if we think of Him as Father. Our prayers matter greatly to Him; He needs our petitions and gratitude if He is to develop and conduct the intimate relationship with us which He desires.

The mysteriousness and unique personal character of our relationship with God also must be kept in mind when one considers the action of the Holy Spirit in our life of prayer. In an enigmatic passage, St. Paul says:

> The Spirit too helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought; but the Spirit himself makes intercession for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in speech. He who searches hearts knows what the Spirit means, for the Spirit intercedes for the saints as God himself wills (Rom 8.26-27).

To prevent the misuse of this passage to detract from the equal divinity of the Holy Spirit, it often is interpreted to mean simply that the Spirit causes us to ask as we should and that He stirs right desires in us.[15] Similarly, the intercession of our Lord Jesus, which is admitted to be such in a real sense, tends to be limited by the qualifying "as man," because insofar as He is the divine Word it seems more accurate to say that we pray to Him rather than pray through Him.

No doubt we do pray to the one God and to every one of the divine Persons. However, it seems to me that it is a mistake to reject a more straightforward understanding of "the Spirit himself makes intercession for us." "The unity of the Church at prayer is brought about by the Holy Spirit, who is the same in Christ (cf. Lk 10.21), in the whole Church, and in every baptized person."[16] The Holy Spirit is the gift which the Father gives to those who ask (cf. Lk 11.13). As I explained in chapter seven, section I, there is good reason to consider ourselves to have distinct personal relationships with each of the three divine Persons.

Christian prayer is the basic act of Christian life. It is a work of living faith--in other words, it is a work of charity. In praying, God's adopted children act toward Him according to the divine nature He has begotten in them through the gift of the Spirit, as St. Paul also teaches:

> All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. You did not receive a spirit of slavery leading you back into fear, but a spirit of adoption through which we cry out, "Abba!" (that is, "Father"). The Spirit himself gives witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Rom 8.14-16).

As little, undeveloped, embryonic children of God (cf. 1 Jn 3.2, 9, 18), we are not yet capable of acting fully by ourselves according to the nature we have from the Father. (We do not yet "see him as he is"--that is, experience the fullness of divine life.) However, the Spirit who "is the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son," somehow mediates our relationship with Them, supplying what we simply cannot supply ourselves, as a pregnant mother mediates her unborn child's relationship with its human father, with other people, and with the world at large, doing for it what it cannot yet do for itself.

God allows us to share in His life by degrees rather than all at once, not because He is grudging nor because He lacks the power to overcome evil and to divinize us without our help, but rather because He is generous and because He has the power to make us cooperators to some extent in His work of redeeming and divinizing us. Yet the Father loves us and desires our fulfillment in His own life with creative intensity: "It is God's will that you grow in holiness" (1 Thess 4.3).

Like a human father, the Father sends us the help we need to accomplish what we cannot do for ourselves. First the Word, then the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 14.16). Through Them we receive from the Father the gift of our own powers, our own responsibilities, our own actions, and our own merits. But over and above all of this, the Spirit in person unites the Church, and so the Church comes to her Lord in communion with Him. Likewise, the Word in person will "bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one" (Eph 1.10), and Christ "will hand over the kingdom to God the Father" (1 Cor 15.24).

Therefore, it seems to me that we can say without detracting from Their equal divinity that the Spirit prays with us and on our behalf, and likewise that our Lord Jesus intercedes for us not only insofar as He is man but also (although in a different sense) insofar as He is the eternal Son.

K. Why should liturgical prayer be the center of each Christian's prayer life?

Just as love play in marriage goes beyond the communing of conversation into the behavior by which love is made, so worship of God in religion goes beyond the communing of prayer into the behavior by which the relationship with God is really accepted and developed. Now, any true love-making is preceded, accompanied, and followed by loving thoughts and words; similarly, any true act of worship is preceded, accompanied, and followed by prayer. Indeed, the dimension of prayer is so essential and determinative of acts of worship that worship can be considered rightly to be precisely prayer carried out in action.

The sacred liturgy of the Catholic Church is nothing else but the Church's worship of God. Apart from the liturgy, members of the Church can worship individually or in groups, but their acts of worship--excellent though they might be--constitute worship in the Church, not worship of the Church. (The distinction here is parallel to that which I make between teaching in the Church and teaching of the Church in chapter fifteen, section H.) In his great encyclical on the liturgy, Pius XII explains that the Church acts in union with Christ, who remains present to her in many ways, in particular when she offers prayers of praise and petition through Him to our heavenly Father. He concludes with this clear statement of what the liturgy is:

> The sacred liturgy is consequently the public worship which our redeemer as head of the Church renders to the Father as well as the worship which the community of the faithful renders to its Founder, and through Him to the heavenly Father. It is, in short, the worship rendered by the Mystical Body of Christ in the entirety of its Head and members.[17]

Vatican II assumes this formulation into its own more complex teaching, which stresses equally the aspect of the liturgy as worship and its aspect as redeeming and sanctifying act. In both aspects, the liturgy is primarily Christ's action and He is always present in it (cf. SC 7).

In chapter eleven, section H (see especially, page 11-7, lines 59-73), I have explained the unity and complexity of the action of Jesus. The human life of the Incarnate Word is both revelatory sign and appropriate human response to revelation, and these two aspects mutually include one another without in any way becoming confused.

The work of redemption is primarily God's work, effected in the re-creation of the universe damaged by sin, a re-creation which has begun with the resurrection of Jesus. However, by the incarnation of the Word, the work of redemption also has been made human work, and thus a divine-human cooperation. Jesus consummated His part of the work by

His freely accepted death on the cross (cf. Jn 19.30). His entire life expressed the commitment which led Him to this final act and thus prepared for it, and so His whole life must be considered part of his redemptive act. This redemptive act, considered both as a revelatory sign of God's love and as a human response to it, is made present to us in the liturgy of the Church, most especially and centrally in the sacrifice and sacrament of the Eucharist (cf. SC 10).

As revelatory sign, the redemptive act presented to us in the liturgy is sacrament; it does what it signifies, because God's revelation is really effective communication of Himself to us. As human response to God's love, the redemptive act participated in by us in the liturgy is perfect worship, as Pius XII stressed; in the Spirit we are united with Christ the Head of the Body, and through Him we worship the Father.

Once one grasps what the liturgy is, one can see easily why liturgical prayer should be the center of each Christian's life of prayer. Liturgical prayer is nothing but the loving thoughts and words which are the formative aspect of liturgical worship, the other aspect being the ritual deeds in which the Church completes her intercourse with her divine Spouse. Liturgical worship is the redemptive act of Christ made present for us to participate in, both as beneficiaries and as subordinated co-redeemers of ourselves and of others. The whole of Christian life is to be lived in communion with Christ. Therefore, the prayer which forms the remainder of one's life must flow from and return to the liturgy as to its vital center, and in particular from and to the Eucharist as to its heart.

However, the centrality of the liturgy in Christian prayer-life must not be thought to preclude the need for personal prayer (cf. SC 12). A vital center must be bodied out to be complete, and an extension of the soul which enlivens the heart must be present in every member. Similarly, the personal life of good deeds which God has prepared for each Christian (cf. Eph 2.10) is required to complete his or her unique share in the redemptive work, and this personal life must be shaped by personal prayer, just as the personal life of Jesus was shaped by His personal prayer.

If one's personal life is not lived in a Christian way, which means in a prayerful way, then the liturgy itself becomes isolated and loses its essential point--namely, to be the medium by which we participate in redemption both passively and actively. If the liturgy is isolated, it quickly falls either into sterile formalism, coldly going through meaningless motions, or into fruitless emotionalism, which provides nothing but the apparent good of religion, stopping with the experience instead of proceeding to fulfillment in the whole reality of relationship with God. Unfortunately, if too many did the liturgy before Vatican II in a formalistic way, now too many do it in a superficial and emotional way, relishing the experience as a substitute for the reality of religion.

L. Some further considerations concerning liturgical prayer

Because the redemptive act of Jesus is the culminating revelatory sign and because Scripture is the primary literary expression of the whole of divine revelation, it is appropriate that the liturgy, which makes the redemptive act present to us for our participation, makes abundant use of Scripture. Because God's revelation in Jesus also includes the perfectly appropriate human response to His love, Scripture is used in the liturgy not only as the means by which God speaks to us, but also as the means by which we speak back to Him. God in Christ speaks to us especially in the Liturgy of the Word; with Christ we respond most especially in the psalms and other Scriptural prayers of the Liturgy of the Hours (cf. SC 6, 7, and 83-84).

The revelation of God's redeeming love is proclaimed in the words of Scripture and carried out by the deeds of the sacraments (cf. SC 6); the worshipping response of Jesus as Head and the Church as His Body is expressed in words certainly acceptable to the Father, since drawn from Scripture, and carried out by a liturgy of Christian life united with the redeeming life of Christ (cf. Rom 12.1-2), whose sacrifice the Father could not refuse (cf. Heb 9.11-10.18).

As divine communication, the liturgy brings heaven to earth, most especially by the real presence of Christ in glory in the Eucharist; as human response, the liturgy brings the earthly Church and all of her participating children into the heavenly courts, to sing with the angels (cf. SC 8; also, the ending of all Prefaces). Thus the continuity between Christian life in this world and in heaven, which I discussed in chapter seven, sections H through O, actually is attained in the liturgy.

The reading and hearing of Scripture within the liturgy is, in a special sense, sacramental. It is Christ "Himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church" (SC 7). This presence, of course, is mediated by the one who proclaims the Word in the name of the Lord, and who makes his own role clear by the concluding assertion: "This is the Word of the Lord" or "This is the gospel of the Lord."

If Jesus appeared to us "live" on a television screen and we heard Him through its speaker, we would not doubt that He speaks to us now and we hear Him doing so. God has chosen instead to use the better instrument of a living human person, and in so doing to allow the person used to share consciously in His communication. We ought not to allow the quality of the means to detract from our sense of the realism of the presence of Jesus with us when we listen to Him speaking in the liturgy.

Science is not in science books; it is in the minds and activities of people who do science. Operas are not in their printed scripts, but only in their staged performances. Similarly, the communication which is revelation and faith is not actual in the text of Scripture as a literary document but rather in the careful reading and prayerful hearing of the Word, primarily in the liturgy, and then by extension in personal prayer. For this reason, study of Scripture which is in continuity with the liturgy--as the faithful study of Scripture can and ought always to be--is itself an important form of prayer (cf. DV 21 and 25).

In view of what I have explained in the present section, one can easily see how seriously irreverent it is for anyone to detract in any way from the precise and prayerful use of Scripture in the liturgy as decreed by the Church. Yet some slight Scripture by failing to study it; they find the Liturgy of the Hours, for example, a dull exercise,

because they have never taken the trouble to think the Psalms through. Others slight Scripture by reading it without preparation and without the sense that Christ speaks in them. Others slight Scripture by replacing it with other material, or by making unauthorized cuts and substitutions. Many priests slight Scripture by giving poorly prepared and ill delivered homilies, never thinking that if the announcer who summarizes and interprets a presidential statement must be well prepared and incisive, so much more the announcer who summarizes and interprets the Word of the Lord.

The liturgy, because it is the work of the whole Church, must have and does have an interpersonal character, which some who dislike it call "objective" and "impersonal." They mindlessly regard this interpersonal quality as a defect, which they attempt to remedy either by personalizing the liturgy or by promoting other forms of prayer and devotion as substitutes for the liturgy. (As I have explained already and will explain more fully in section Q, below, devotions in addition to the liturgy and in harmony with it are necessary and commendable.)

However, the interpersonal quality of the liturgy is no defect; rather this very quality is one of its important strengths, for in virtue of it the liturgy unites the whole Church in the Spirit with Christ in a single harmonious choir performing together the same worship. To accept the demands of the liturgy upon oneself is to adapt oneself to life in the Spirit, to submit one's subjectivity to communion in Christ. This acceptance itself is an important act of humility and obedience--the precise virtues which are basic modes of Christian response.

Therefore, if anyone finds himself to be insincere in doing the liturgy, if anyone misses in liturgical prayer the gratification of authentic self-expression, the remedy is not to tamper with the liturgy. Rather, the remedy is to change oneself interiorly until one conforms to the liturgy. We should not conform our voices to our minds, but rather our minds to our voices, as St. Benedict says (cf. SC 90). For it is for us to put on the Lord Jesus, not for Him to make provision for the desires of our flesh (cf. Rom 13.14)--desires such as not liking the assigned readings or not finding the psalms in accord with our moods.

One final point. The prayers composed by the Church for liturgical use also provide an excellent model for personal prayer. As St. Paul says, prayers are to be offered--supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings--for all humankind (cf. 1 Tm 2.1-2). The prayer formula most often used by the Church includes all these elements:

> Almighty, eternal God (prayer), who has given such and such a benefit (thanksgiving), grant, we beseech you (supplication) to give us such and such, through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord (intercession).

A complete prayer involves not four different prayer-acts, but one act with all of these aspects. The prayers of the faithful ought to be constructed in this style (cf. SC 53); so should personal petitions.

M. Is every Christian called to contemplative prayer?

I distinguish between "contemplative prayer" in a wide sense and "contemplative prayer" in a strict sense. By "contemplative prayer" used in the wide sense I mean a loving effort to hear, understand, and assimilate what God has revealed, and to respond to Him with attentive praise, thanks, and practical deliberation conducted in the light of faith. For "contemplative prayer" in this wide sense I will hereafter substitute "meditation." By "contemplative prayer" in the strict sense I mean what St. Teresa of Avila calls "prayer of recollection" and other types of mystical prayer up to and including what she calls "spiritual marriage"; in other words, by "contemplative prayer" in the strict sense, I mean what writers in spiritual theology call (I think due to misunderstanding) "infused contemplation."[18]

It seems to me that every Christian certainly is called to meditation, but that only certain Christians have as an aspect of their personal vocation the gift of contemplative prayer in the strict sense. This point seems to me to be very important, because if I am right, then the vast majority of Christians, who are not called to contemplative prayer in the strict sense, are much more misled and discouraged in their spiritual lives by much modern writing in spiritual theology than they are rightly directed and helped toward that Christian perfection which is possible in this life, which I considered in sections B and C, above.

Meditation as I have defined it is broader than the systematic mental prayer to which the word "meditation" sometimes is limited. Thoughtful and loving participation in the liturgy is meditation, the prayerful reading of Scripture apart from the liturgy is meditation, the devout saying of vocal prayers such as the rosary is meditation, thought to try to discern God's will in a decision of moment is meditation, examination of conscience is meditation--all these and other forms of prayer including systematic efforts to arouse devotion qualify as meditation. I already have explained that and why both liturgical and personal prayer are essential to Christian life. It follows that meditation--and so what I call "contemplative prayer in the wide sense"--is essential to Christian life.[19]

Moreover, not only must every Christian life be prayerful, it also must have other characteristics usually treated as aspects of the contemplative life. Basically, a Christian must strive to overcome every fault and imperfection and to conform totally to God's will--in other words, every Christian must strive for perfection. Secondarily, every Christian ought to have some compelling experience of the presence and all-powerful love of God in his or her life. But such compelling experience can take many forms; it is by no means limited to the modalities described by the great doctors of mysticism.

I already discussed two of these forms of experience in chapter seven, section I. Everyone can experience the unshakeable firmness of his or her own living faith and the power the Spirit gives to fulfill the law of Christ. One need only abide in Jesus and desire with the Spirit's help to do the Father's will to have these experiences. (One who is impenitent in mortal sin certainly does not experience the Spirit's power to do what is right, and one who is obdurate is likely to begin to have some doubts in matters of faith.)

There are many other modes in which one can have an awareness of the personal relationship one has by living faith with the Spirit, the Son, and the Father. Devout participants in the liturgy often sense the presence of Christ--for example, when they listen to or proclaim the Word of God, receive or consecrate the Eucharist, receive or give absolution in the sacrament of Penance, and so forth. Those who find and accept their personal vocation with living faith and try to fulfill it with constant fidelity very often are aware of the hand of God in their lives, to make things work out and to bring good out of evil. Those who share with the right dispositions in the wonderful work of the Church often experience the almost palpable presence of our Lord through His Spirit; many participants in the last papal election narrated just this experience.

For those who are called to it, a life directed toward contemplative prayer in the strict sense is an excellent gift. It is a special form of religious life whose proper work is to pray.[20] This style of Christian life is a true and simple way of holiness. It yields extraordinary fulfillment in the most important human good--that of religion--in the form of intense intimacy with God. Moreover, this style of life is a true apostolate of great importance, since it serves the Church by providing the constant nourishment of prayer and the example of prayerfulness, while it also proclaims to nonbelievers that the kingdom we seek is not of this world.[21]

But the call to contemplative prayer in the strict sense is not universal. To show this I use the authority of St. Teresa of Avila, who is a doctor of the Church and whose authority is relied upon by all the writers in spiritual theology who maintain that everyone is called to "infused" contemplation.

St. Teresa generally refers to the various forms of prayer which I have grouped under the heading "contemplative prayer in the strict sense" as "favours," because they are experienced as gifts of the Spirit. At times she speaks of these favours as if they were charismatic gifts, given more for the benefit of others than for the spiritual welfare of the one who receives them:

> He grants these favours, then, not because those who receive them are holier than those who do not, but in order that His greatness may be made known, as we have seen in the case of St. Paul and the Magdalen, and in order that we may praise Him in His creatures.[22]

This point is important, because everyone is called to holiness (cf. LG 39-42). Hence, if the relationship between holiness and favours is not essential, then not everyone is necessarily called to contemplative prayer in the strict sense.

Teresa writes about favours only out of obedience. She also points out that they are quite helpful if one happens to receive them.[23] But God

> . . .is not obliged to grant them to us, as He is obliged to grant us glory if we keep his commandments, without doing which we could not be saved, and He knows better than we what is good for us and which of us truly love Him.[24]

The only thing essential to Christian perfection is perfect conformity of one's will to God's will. This conformity is possible without favours. "There are many saintly people who have never known what it is to receive a favour of this kind . . . and there are others who received such favours, although they are not saintly."[25]

Again, Teresa explains with great clarity that not all souls are suited to contemplation. Even when considering the life of Carmelite nuns, which is directed toward contemplative prayer, she says:

> . . .it is very important for us to realize that God does not lead us all by the same road, and perhaps she who believes herself to be going along the lowest of roads is the highest in the Lord's eyes. So it does not follow that, because all of us in this house practise prayer, we are all <u>perforce</u> to be contemplatives. That is impossible; and those of us who are not would be greatly discouraged if we did not grasp the truth that contemplation is something given by God, and, as it is not necessary for salvation and God does not ask it of us before He gives us our reward, we must not suppose that anyone else will require it of us.[26]

True, a few chapters later Teresa seems to contradict this statement by suggesting that all (all Carmelite nuns) are called to the contemplative state. However, it seems to me her real point is that no one is excluded; no one is forbidden to strive for the greatest intimate experience of God, and no one who so strives will go unrewarded. Precisely how such striving will be rewarded is another matter:

> If you always pursue this determination to die rather than fail to reach the end of the road, the Lord may bring you through this life with a certain degree of thirst, but in the life which never ends He will give you great abundance to drink and you will have no fear of its failing you. May the Lord grant us never to fail Him. Amen.[27]

In other words, all--that is, all Carmelite nuns--share in a life directed toward contemplative prayer in the strict sense, but in some cases the hoped for fruit will be given in this life only in respect to the one thing necessary: never to fail the Lord.[28] The favours of contemplation will be received only in heaven.

N. <u>Further reflections upon contemplative prayer</u>

St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and certain others who have written about contemplative prayer in the strict sense are saints and doctors of the Church; for this reason, we cannot reasonably doubt that they are talking about something excellent which has an important place in the lives of some Christians. However, it seems to me that in certain ways the doctors of mysticism have misdescribed their own experiences and ideals, and that these misdescriptions ought to be criticized.

The ideal of Christian life taken for granted by the mystical writers is that of the religious living in a cloister. This ideal involves exclusive dedication to the good of religion; every other human good is regarded as mere means. As I have said, the religious life is excellent, but married people with families and professions ought also to be dedicated to other human goods, not only as means to more intense intimacy with God, but also as their contribution to the fulfillment of everything in Christ--that is to say, as parts of the ultimate end itself.[29]

In chapter seven, section P, I criticized St. Augustine's conception of the relationship between this life and heaven. His conception was heavily influenced by neoplatonism. Many mystical writers also express themselves within a neoplatonic conceptual framework. Thus they aim at a pure union with God, a union in which the "earlier stages" of prayer are left behind like so many camps on the way to a mountain peak, and a union in which human action is of minimal or even vanishing significance.

Those who adopt this neoplatonic framework wholeheartedly and make it into a doctrine easily proceed into some form of quietism with disregard even for essential responsibilities and moral limits. It is a great merit of the orthodox Catholic mystical writers that they firmly rejected all such excesses. St. Teresa of Avila was a person of great common and Christian sense. She never tires of saying that love is a matter of virtue and doing God's will.[30] She also points out that prayer in general and even the greatest gifts of mystical prayer are important for their practical effects: They help us to perfect the virtues, make us able to imitate the great sufferings of Christ, and give us the strength which fits us for service to our neighbor.[31]

An aspect of the neoplatonic influence on Christian life is the emphasis upon an individualistic, interior spiritual life. One withdraws from other people and from action into oneself, and within oneself seeks to ascend to God. In modern times, the one-sidedness of a neoplatonically influenced view of spiritual life has been distorted further by the common, dualistic conception of the human person. People suppose that their soul is hidden somewhere inside themselves, and that God is hidden somewhere inside their soul. Christian spirituality is systematically misinterpreted in line with this view; for example, St. Paul's statement that Christ lives in him is taken as a motto for the pursuit of interiority, whereas it should stand for the transformation of one's whole life in Christ. Christ lives in us when we participate in the liturgy, when we share in the work of the Church, when we do the works of love, as well as when we engage in meditation.

The mystical writers also emphasize the experienced passivity with which gifts of contemplative prayer in the strict sense are received. This characteristic of the experience has led to the idea that this prayer is more passive than active, that in it the Holy Spirit is active while the soul is at rest, that the prayer itself is "infused" contemplation. It seems to me that these notions probably involve a misinterpretation of the data.

If contemplative gifts belong to the soul, they must be actuations of it, and so have the character of human acts. No doubt the Holy Spirit is active, but He is no less active in every Christian prayer and meritorious work; indeed, as I have explained previously, the more we do, the greater His gift. To think otherwise is to make an error in the theology of the Christian similar to the error of commingling in Christology. As for the so-called infused character of contemplation, one can reduce this quality to the common character of Christian life as divine grace, based upon what truly is infused--namely, the love of God poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit--together with the unique experienced qualities of some forms of prayer.[32]

When one experiences effortless, spontaneous, global, and especially moving states of prayer, one is more than usually conscious that prayer and all of Christian life is a grace. One tends to forget that excellence in any line of activity--for example, participating in a sport, doing theology, or writing poetry--flowers into acts with these qualities. It would be surprising if experts in prayer did not at times experience such gifts. However, there is nothing more <u>exclusively</u> divine in origin in such experiences than there is in experiences in which one who has faith and the mission to articulate it finds himself or herself speaking or writing far better than he or she knew how to do. Creativity is a fact of human life; even immoral artists, inventors, and entrepreneurs often have it in abundance.

Needless to say, in criticizing this distorted view of the interior life, I by no means retract what I have said in previous sections about the necessity of prayer, including personal as well as liturgical prayer, and the necessity that such prayer, whether one makes use of formulas or not, be truly meditative. In other words, every Christian must be a contemplative--in the wide sense.

O. <u>Some reflections on the psychology of prayer and on distractions</u>

As St. John of the Cross says, contemplative prayer in the strict sense is a knowledge through love.[33] One who has the act of living faith in principle ought to be able to reflect upon the act, not attending so much to the content--that is, to propositional truths of faith--as to the divine goodness for the sake of which one is committed to God revealing Himself. This reflection thus should reach the principle by which one is in communion with the divine Persons.

But if such reflection is the psychological basis of so-called "infused" contemplation, why does not everyone with living faith have the experience? I think the answer is that to the extent that one does not love God perfectly, the act of faith itself has mixed and somewhat defective motives. One who has such motives is psychologically constrained to stop or block reflection. However, if one's will is as upright as possible (by one's cooperation with God's purifying grace), so that one is unwilling even to commit venial sin deliberately, then one's motives become purer, the habitual reflection of the prayerfully attentive mind becomes uninhibited, the experience of union with God by charity can emerge, and this experience itself will contribute to further purgation and the flourishing of Christian life.[34]

In providing this psychological account of so-called "infused" contemplation, I do not deny that it is a divine gift. All Christian prayer and everything else good and holy is grace. The whole order of nature and history does not stand outside the plan God was pleased to decree in Christ, but within it (cf. Eph 1.9-10). Thus, we are not mistaken when we discern the supernatural character of experiences which we have by relating them to and understanding them in terms of the central principle of Christian life--namely, living faith, the act in which the Holy Spirit and human freedom cooperate and which is the life of Christ in us.

A full appreciation of the need for and effectiveness of various sorts of prayer requires attention to the psychology by which they are done and are related to other acts of Christian life. A study of this subject goes beyond my present purpose, but a few notes to indicate the direction such a study would have to take might be helpful.

As I already explained in section L, above, liturgy is done by the individual's acceptance of, conformity to, and execution in community of the prayer and ritual acts prescribed by Christ and the Church. Psychologically, liturgy demands humility and obedience for its very possibility, and so it has immediate effects on the character of participants. The social aspect of liturgy also of itself forms the members of the Church into a functioning society--for instance, people cannot help cooperating to build a parish church and then they meet at Mass. Participants in the liturgy who strive to do it with attention and other required dispositions gradually bring their minds and hearts into agreement with their public acts of prayer and worship.

Ordinary sorts of systematic meditation work in a quite different way. One reads or recalls, perhaps from Scripture, some topic which leads to reflection upon some aspects of God's goodness and the wonderful things He has done, and the wonderful things for which we hope. Reflection leads to joy, praise, and thanksgiving for what already is given, and to desire, contrition, petition, and resolution with respect to what must still be hoped for and pursued.

In many cases, the meditation is elaborated not so much to articulate one's acts of faith and charitable desire and joy, as it is to elicit images and emotions. This process is of importance, because the regulation and stimulation of emotion is vital to the avoidance of sin and the living out of one's faith. People who do not meditate simply do not feel like resisting temptation and undertaking the hard work of following Christ.

Many vocal prayers, especially repetitive ones such as the rosary, have a somewhat different psychology. At one level, they work something like the liturgy; one submits to the formulas and is drawn to conform oneself to what one is doing. At another level, they make use of the inherent distractability of the mind by proposing meditation topics to which one allows oneself to be distracted. In this way, many people who find it difficult not to be distracted from systematic meditation are able to meditate while preoccupied with the routine of vocal prayer.

Nonstructured meditative recollection, such as centering prayer, seems to work in still another way, although distraction also plays a very important role in it. A person who undertakes such prayer creates by the very fact of doing so a physical and psychological context of prayer. This context provides a principle by which distractions are sorted and evaluated.

At the subconscious level, the manner in which one gently puts aside various thoughts which come to mind serves to sort them out, much as the tone of the psychiatrist's "uh-huh" does for the patient on the couch. One in a recollected frame of mind does not in exactly the same way set aside a pious thought, a thought about a task to be done, and a temptation; the subconscious is notified to take one's classifications into account.

At the conscious level, thoughts which come to mind and persist during such prayer--or which recur strongly as one ends it--seem to have a special force and validity if they agree with the stance by which one engages in such prayer. In other words, one makes oneself suggestible toward the holy. For example, a person who is suffering some grave difficulty and who cannot resist during nonstructured meditation the thought that God is provident and that His providence is demonstrated throughout salvation history is more likely to be able to face the difficulty with confidence than if, other things being equal, the same idea were purposely brought to mind in systematic meditation or suggested in a little homily by a helpful confessor. The content will make the thought about the Father's providential love seem much more like a personal message whispered by the Spirit in one's heart.

Such explanations of the psychology of prayer should no more lessen our esteem for the value of each sort of prayer than an understanding of the digestive system lessens our relish for good food.

P. Charismatic renewal

In 1975 the Committee for Pastoral Research and Practices of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States published a "Statement on Catholic Charismatic Renewal." Students ought to obtain and carefully read this well-prepared and balanced statement. Here I merely summarize a few of the important points it contains.

The bishops begin by citing Vatican II and St. Paul for the point that the Spirit leads the Church not only by sacraments and ministries, but also by various personal gifts distributed in an unpredictable way. Such gifts can be commonplace or extraordinary. They are for the good of the Church as a whole. They have been given from the beginning and through the ages.

These gifts are not self-authenticating. What seem to be gifts of the Spirit must be tested by the standard of what undoubtedly is from the Spirit--namely, charity, sound doctrine, the worship and practice of the Church, and her legitimate law.

The Catholic Charismatic Renewal is taken by many people to be an important contemporary manifestation of the Spirit. This movement has had many good effects--"positive signs." Turning more intensely to Christ, praying more, experiencing spiritual values and God at work, increasing devotion to the Eucharist, renewing devotion to Mary--these are some of the positive signs.

But the movement also has limits, some of which are negative signs. Elitism can be a problem; some people begin to form cliques and separate themselves from the Church instead of enriching others. Biblical fundamentalism distorts and reduces the fullness of Catholic faith. Anti-intellectualism often is a problem. Startling phenomena--such as healing, prophecy, and praying in tongues--can mislead, for they are not always genuine and even when they are genuine are not as important as the common principle of Christian life, namely, living faith.

Pastorally, the isolation of the charismatic movement from the rest of the Church must be avoided and overcome. Both those involved and other priests and bishops should work together to achieve this objective. Charismatic groups should be integrated into parishes; priestly leadership within the movement is essential, and priests who are not experienced must proceed with caution. The movement needs leaders who are trained in Catholic doctrine, Scripture study, spirituality, and so forth. Continual or exclusive involvment in ecumenical prayer groups is to be avoided, and ecumenical activity ought to follow the Church's guidelines.

Friendly dialogue within the Church is required if the charismatic movement is to flourish in a wholesome way. Openness on both sides is needed. The less mature need and ought to accept guidance. Small communities can be a desirable development, but prudence and charity toward the Church at large are required.

Q. What is the role of sacramentals and devotions in Christian life?

Two things are fundamental in Christian life. On the one hand, the liturgy is central, because by it one participates in the redemptive work of God in Christ. On the other hand, one's personal vocation and its execution in daily life are essential, because by this one makes one's own contribution to fulfillment in Christ in union with His redemptive act. Sacramentals and devotions are subordinate and instrumental to the two fundamental things. Sacramentals extend the liturgy into personal, daily life; devotions personally assimilate divine realities and prepare those who engage in them for more worthy participation in the liturgy.

Sacramentals are acts which are somehow related to the sacraments, done by the Church, and effective by the prayer of the Church as an articulation of the sacraments (cf. SC 60). Some sacramentals are directly associated with the sacraments; for example, various acts included in the liturgy of the Eucharist which go beyond the essentials are sacramentals. Other sacramentals are less directly related to sacraments. For example, holy water recalls baptism; the ashes of Ash Wednesday prepare for penance; the anointing of kings is perhaps related to confirmation.

Very often, "sacramental" is taken to refer to certain objects--holy water, candles, palms, and so on. This usage is not wrong, but it can be misleading, if one forgets that the objects have likeness or relation to sacraments only insofar as they are blessed by the prayer of the Church and/or used in some way connected with the central liturgical rites.[35]

One can most easily understand sacramentals if one compares them to various aspects of other human relationships. A couple who are consummating their marriage can do everything essential in five minutes. Normally, they do not hurry so. The joyous occasion is given an appropriate setting and elaborated into a honeymoon. People having a dinner for company do not settle for Macdonald's. Similarly, the Church elaborates the sacraments (cf. SC 61).

The young couple bring home souvenirs; they extend their honeymoon into their later life by recalling it and using items connected with it. Company takes home a gift, perhaps a bit of dessert for the next day's lunch. Similarly, the Church extends the sacraments out into daily life. The liturgy is too lovely to leave it at the door of the Church; one must take it home. And the Church provides souvenirs and samples so that one can do so.

Devotions are essentially specifications of worship to provide a personalized focus and pattern, proportionate to the needs of particular individuals and groups. Devotions are like optional extras on an automobile; they are not essential for everyone, but they do personalize the essentials in a way which can be extremely important to people according to their diverse needs.

Each devotion focuses attention on some particular religious truth or truths, some particular religious value or values; this special focus calls for specific acts of mind and will, specific emotions, and specific practices. This specification is required because people can assimilate the wholeness of revelation and of Christian values only little by little, and not without some helps in addition to the common liturgy, since people have such greatly differing intellectual, emotional, and behavioral capacities, subconscious make-ups, personal vocations, moral situations (levels of sinfulness and holiness), and so forth.

As a specification of Christian devotion as a whole, the devotions must conform to the principles of the whole--in other words, they must be in accord with Catholic teaching, worship, morality, and law.[36] If devotions meet this criterion, they ought never to be despised or treated with disrespect; condescending attitudes toward other peoples' devotions show a pharisaical attitude.

Prior to the reform of the liturgy by Vatican II, the comparative dryness and tendency to formalism in the Church's proper worship made a rich devotional life essential by way of compensation.[37] Yet even with the reform of the liturgy, popular devotions remain necessary. Vatican II itself, precisely in reforming the liturgy, warmly commends them, provided that they meet the standard of conformity to the principles of the Church's worship as a whole, and somehow derive from and lead to the liturgy (cf. SC 13). It is especially important that devotions fit the liturgical time; Stations of the Cross hardly would be appropriate on the evening of Easter Sunday.

As I have explained previously, the liturgy itself ought not to be adapted (except as the Church has stipulated) to suit personal inclinations and needs. The necessary adaptation should be achieved not within the liturgy but by adding appropriate devotions to the liturgy. Thus, the present comparative poverty of popular devotional life is one factor which redounds to the detriment of sound and fruitful completion of the liturgical renewal mandated by Vatican II.

R. Why should priests especially cultivate prayer?

Priests have a special responsibility to cultivate a rich life of prayer. There are several reasons for this, all of them related to the ministry of the priest.

First, prayer is essential to Christian life, and more intense prayer vital to growth toward Christian perfection. As I explained in section D, above, priests are especially bound to pursue Christian perfection. Therefore, they are especially bound to an intense life of prayer. If priests are going to be models of Christian living, they must embody in a marked degree all of the essentials of Christian living. Prayer is one of the essentials. Therefore, the level of prayer-activity otherwise adequate for a pious person is altogether insufficient for a priest who wishes to fulfill his vocation.

Second, the priest is assigned a unique role in the liturgy, especially in the Liturgy of the Eucharist and of the Hours, which requires a special grasp upon and assimilation of Scripture (cf. DV 25; PO 13). For the same reason, the priest must prepare with special effort for devout participation in the liturgy. These responsibilities can be fulfilled adequately only if the priest makes special efforts to read Scripture devoutly and prayerfully, and also to cultivate whatever personal devotions he finds necessary to bring himself into authentic accord with the sacred words he utters and acts he does in the person of Christ.[38] Holy things are dangerous. The priest who is not prayerful is likely to be casual about and even contemptuous of the holy things with which he is so familiar by virtue of his daily work.

Third, the lifestyle of the priest offers special opportunities for laziness, self-indulgence, and pride. He is freed of the immediate demands of a family, from the nagging of a woman and the constant observation of innocent children; he is sheltered in a community of understanding brothers. The temptations which arise in this situation--among which temptations against chastity probably seldom are the most important--can be resisted only if the priest through prayer cannot fail without being nagged by the Spirit and cannot forget the constant observation of Jesus, Mary, and all the saints.

Fourth, the priest has an important responsibility to help the faithful in his care to pray more effectively not only in the liturgy but also in all of their personal prayer life (cf. PO 5). To fulfill this responsibility, the priest needs to have a rich and varied experience of prayer. Like a high-school coach who needs to know something about all of the sports and forms of athletics, whether he personally prefers them or not, a priest has to know something about all the types and forms of prayer, in order to encourage and guide those for whom each type and form is suited. For this reason, priests cannot be excessively specialized in their personal prayer-life, and they need to become acquainted by experience with any form of prayer and devotion which the Church commends or approves. For example, no priest should be without experience in a charismatic prayer group, in the most advanced form of recollection of which he is capable, and in popular devotions such as the rosary.

In its treatment of the ministry and life of priests, Vatican II devotes an article to the problem of the integration of the priestly life. Under modern conditions, there is a special danger in everyone's life that activities will become dispersed. No system for organizing one's activities and one's exercises will solve this problem. The solution for the priest is to make Christ the center of His life and to model himself on our Lord Jesus, who singlemindedly set about to do the Father's will. The Mass is the center of a priest's life; he must strive to apply it to himself first of all. "But this goal cannot be achieved unless priests themselves penetrate ever more deeply through prayer into the mystery of Christ" (PO 14).

Thus there are two chief centers for the priest's life of prayer, the two tables from which we receive the bread which has come down from heaven: Scripture and the Sacrifice of the Mass. These two centers are not separated, because the Word of the Lord in Scripture and the deed of the Lord in the Eucharist together constitute a revelatory unit (cf. DV 2). United in the Spirit to form the Church, the priest and his people daily receive through Christ the communication of the truth and love of the Father, which Itself is the Word incarnate in human words and human flesh, sacramentally present by the proclamation and consecratory act of the priest, who speaks and acts in the person of Jesus.

Notes to chapter thirty-one

1. See also St. Thomas Aquinas, De veritate, qu. 28, art. 4, c.

2. St. John of the Cross, The Ascent of Mount Carmel, II, 5, 3, in The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1979), p. 116. See also St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa theologiae, 2-2, qq. 82-85.

3. In The Rites, pp. 444-445, an ecclesially suggested form for the examination of conscience provides a practical articulation of what it means in the Catholic Church to talk about perfection. The heading is coordinated with and divided against headings which organize the responsibilities of Christian life toward God and neighbor, and thus is concerned mainly with personal vocation and moral responsibilities toward oneself.

4. With respect to this last point, see John Paul II, Dominicae Cenae, 12 (L'Osservatore Romano, English Edition, March 24, 1980, p. 9).

5. Pius XII, Menti Nostrae, 15 (Washington, D.C.: N.C.W.C., 1950), p. 7.

6. St. Francis de Sales, Treatise on the Love of God, trans. John K. Ryan, vol. 1 (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books, 1974), p. 268.

7. St. Francis de Sales, Introduction to the Devout Life, trans. John K. Ryan (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1972), p. 42.

8. See St. Thomas, Summa theologiae, 2-2, qu. 83, art. 9.

9. See Pius XII, Mystici corporis, 87-90 (Washington, D.C.: N.C.W.C., 1943), pp. 37-40; Mediator dei, 31-37 (Washington, D.C.: N.C.W.C., 1947), pp. 14-18.

10. See Gabriel M. Braso, O.S.B., Liturgy and Spirituality, trans. Leonard J. Doyle, 2nd ed. rev. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1971), pp. 68-78, for an excellent development of this point.

11. See The Liturgy of the Hours, vol. 1, pp. 22-24.

12. Ibid., p. 26; Discourse on the Psalms, 85, 1.

13. See St. Thomas, op. cit., art. 14, ad 4 (a response to a sed contra).

14. Ibid., art. 2, c.
15. See, for instance, St. Thomas Aquinas, In Rom., viii, 5, nn. 692-693.
16. See "General Instruction," The Liturgy of the Hours, vol. 1, p. 27.
17. Pius XII, Mediator dei, 20; ed. cit., p. 10.
18. Vatican II often uses the words "comtemplate" and "contemplation": SC 2, 103; LG 6, 41, 46, 64, 65; PC 5, 7, 16; DV 7, 8; GS 8, 56, 57, 59, 82, 83; CD 35; AG 15, 18, 40; UR 15, 17, 21; and PO 13. Many of these uses refer simply to thinking, even secular thinking, about something; others refer to a prayer-act, but either clearly refer to one which is not contemplation in the strict sense or need not so be interpreted; some refer to the "contemplative" in the technical sense; perhaps a few refer to contemplation in a strict sense (for example, PC 5, AG 18, and UR 15), but in contexts which refer either to a certain vocation or to a particular office of the Church as a whole. Contemplation in the strict sense may be essential to the life of the Church, but it does not follow that it is necessary for every Catholic, any more than the sacraments of Matrimony and Orders are essential to every Christian.
19. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa contra gentiles, 4, 22, makes clear that contemplation in the wide sense is essential to Christian life, since the Holy Spirit leads us with the cooperation of our own intelligence and freedom. Spiritual writers who use a chapter of this sort to support the thesis that everyone is called to "infused" contemplation distort its obvious sense, with the implication that only a very small minority of Christians--those who receive this gift--are led by the Spirit.
20. See St. Thomas, Summa theologiae, 2-2, qq. 180-182.
21. See "Instruction on the Contemplative Life and on the Enclosure of Nuns" ("Venite seorsum"), 15 August 1969, in Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 656-675. This document says that "a certain degree of withdrawal from the world and some measure of contemplation must necessarily be present in every form of Christian life" (p. 661). This sort of statement is taken by writers in spiritual theology to support the position that all are called to "infused" contemplation. But clearly the Sacred Congregation can have nothing of the sort in view, since it talks not about a universal invitation, but of something essential. In other words, "some measure of contemplation" means that mode of prayer which I call "meditation" or some particular form or forms of it.
22. St. Teresa of Avila, Interior Castle, trans. E. Allison Peers (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1961), p. 30.
23. Ibid., pp. 67-68.
24. Ibid., p. 84.
25. Ibid., p. 192.
26. St. Teresa of Avila, The Way of Perfection, trans. E. Allison Peers (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1964), p. 124.
27. Ibid., p. 146.
28. See St. Teresa, Interior Castle, pp. 114-115.
29. See Thomas Verner Moore, The Life of Man with God (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1956), pp. 217-228, for descriptions of persons who lead very holy lives without contemplative prayer in the strict sense.
30. St. Teresa, Interior Castle, pp. 65, 67, 76, 114-116, 174-175.
31. Ibid., pp. 192, 227, 231.
32. For a good treatment of this point, see Louis Bouyer, Introduction to Spirituality, trans. Mary Perkins Ryan (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1961), pp. 76-81.
33. St. John of the Cross, The Spiritual Canticle, 27, 5, in op. cit., p. 518.
34. See Bouyer, op. cit., p. 295, for a somewhat similar account.
35. For a good treatment of sacramentals, see Colman E. O'Neill, O.P., Meeting Christ in the Sacraments (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1963), pp. 323-353.
36. See P. F. Mulhern, "Devotions, Religious," New Catholic Encyclopedia, vol. 4, pp. 833-834.
37. See Braso, op. cit., pp. 194-208.
38. See Pius XII, Mediator dei, 37, ed. cit., p. 18.