

## PRAYER AND THE STUDY OF THEOLOGY

How do we plot the relation of prayer to the study of theology? As two human activities they look at first sight as if they could embarrass and impede one another. They are not obviously directly related to one another any more than the crystallographer's study of structure is related directly to his breaking off from his work to exclaim 'You are a beauty' to the crystal under examination. The relation between the exclamation and the examination is to be found not in themselves but in the crystal where beauty and form are united. So it is in prayer and theology *eminentiore modo*. The relation between them is a derived one, and is to be found directly in the object – God Himself and his freely given revelation of Himself in whom love and knowledge find their perfect relation. It is this perfect relation and identity of love and knowledge in God that makes it possible for our love to be a form of knowledge and our knowledge to be a form of love. But what happens when the object of exclamation and examination is the one who knows and loves me, where there is a reciprocal relation between myself and an active object whose action precedes mine and makes mine possible? What does it mean to study, listen to and respond to this situation which is known climatically in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, who in that flesh knew and loved me, and at this moment knows and loves me?

Theology as well as prayer has a *centre* which can never be lost while we are studying the ever widening circle of disturbance in the pond of our humanity, by the little stone which has been taken from the pond and yet also has been thrown into it. Theology is itself part of that disturbance as in prayer, and neither can be some static contemplation of inert Truth. The 'once for all' belongs to Christ, not to our ridiculous attempt to think of Him and respond to Him. If we are right to find the centre of theology in the disclosure of God in His revelation culminating in the Person of Christ the Eternal Word, then theology presupposes an encounter, a listening, a silence in which the Word is spoken to *me* – received by *me* and the contemporary community. Without a constant personal commerce between ourselves and the object of study, theology would diminish its scope and wilt away, until it was confined to the encounters of other ages and other men with that Word – until it reduced itself to the study of prophetic and apostolic joy and terror with the communication of neither to us. From that dangerous point there is an easy descent to a study of religious ideas. We would have exchanged theology's preoccupation with a God who speaks

and acts, who knows and loves, for a busy interest in other men's talk about God and whether it agrees with our own. That theology can easily become barren which ceases to reckon with a God who has spoken and given but still speaks and gives and that to me; and Prayer is the place of void and emptiness where I can hear the Word that I study in theology – it is the place where I can respond as others have responded before me – the place where the 'He' of study can be the 'Thou for me', where He can say 'It is I myself'. We can therefore readily understand how very often theology merges into prayer and ends in prayer for it is of its nature to open itself to the unheard-of gift of being able to transcend my own grasp of truth, and to go beyond what is merely human and be grasped by the one who is the Truth, by one who unveils Himself now to *me* so that by knowing Him I can love Him and by loving Him, I can know Him. This objective world of *God* which is the world of God's Love, draws near to me in study – opens out to me in my asking, seeking and knocking and seeks to be understood and to be held and loved by me. Prayer is that place where before, during or after study I am allowed to know that what and whom I study is *pro nobis, in nobis* and we might add *sine nobis* with Augustine. To take those words seriously in prayer is not to damage my intellectual efforts, but to enter into the heart of the matter studied in theology. If I separate my understanding from the present reality of the living word who offers me enjoyment and fruition and the possibility of obeying I will be left with nothing which a decent philosopher, psychologist or historian could not do.

But here the problem begins. Does not such a personal encounter gravely affect my intellectual detachment, my open-mindedness towards my study? If I am so open to a daily encounter with the living God in a Holy Spirit bringing me now to the present Jesus, whom my heart knows and my mind loves even during study, does not that prevent me from the painstaking enquiry, the honest facing of my mental hesitations, and the fair consideration of the convictions of other men who have not faith in Christ? Wouldn't I be a better student if I subdued my heart and gave my mind its freedom? But this question poses another – does love make us less scrupulous, less honest, less open, less free? If it was *our* love that was in question we should have to say NO! but if in prayer the Love of *God* is really shed abroad in our hearts isn't it there that we can find a freedom – yes, an intellectual freedom and integrity which we could never give ourselves? It is not the *empty* mind that is necessarily the most open. We cannot leave the object of theology, in hopes of a greater freedom, a greater wholeness and integrity which some ideal, abstract notion of the human mind might offer. The difficulty here arises because the object of theology, namely the

Father known through the Son in the Holy Spirit, combines existence and essence in identity. It is not the contemplation of abstract beauty, goodness and truth, but the God who is all this in His unity of active being. Therefore reflection (*meditatio*, *consideratio* and *contemplatio*) is always open to the direct personal here-and-now contact with God Himself. If the study of such a God precludes intellectual integrity then at a lower level the study of other loves becomes impossible also. The study of theology is the study of the love of God, and His love and His word are inseparable. No one can study love or speak meaningfully of it unless he knows what it is to be loved and to love. Is an intellectual study of music enhanced or spoiled by the enjoyment and participation in the subject? Does then love blind or illuminate? Can fire give light as well as heat? The question is at its most urgent when love is the subject of the understanding as it is in the case of theology – and when that love is the love of God who *is* love when love and being are identical. The theologian is given his position by the object of study. It is best illustrated by that remarkable fresco of Fra Angelico in one of the cells at San Marco, Florence. It pictures St. Dominic reading a book at the feet of the crucified. The book there and most often with us will be the Bible but it may as well be one on nineteenth-century European thought, or on the counter reformation, or on the sociology of religion, but the position of the theologian doesn't change. He is at the foot of the Cross, and the light will come from the fire of that love and the fire of love will come from that light. We dare not move our position for somewhere else more comfortable, less distracting, more fair and impartial. If we do we shall have moved away from theology into the realm of religious study.

We have not reached the heart of the matter in theology until we receive the Word 'not as the Word of man but as it is indeed the Word of God'.<sup>1</sup> The theologian cannot remain ultimately in the forecourt of preliminary work of the mind in the philological or historical aspect of his subject. He dare not adopt a scholarly attitude so objective, so critical, so superior that he finds himself superior to and critical of the Word of God and unable to submit to its plain judgement in prayer. Hans Urs von Balthasar in his profound study of Prayer has this to say: 'The philologist and the historian develop a mental reserve that can be detrimental to contemplation. One who has dissected a text like an anatomist dissecting an organism runs the risk of overlooking the vital principle which forms it and is irreducible'. He continues: 'Great theologians keep an attitude of loving prayer through all their investigations. They even carry out their dissection of the Word out of reverence for the Word, out of love for the Logos who has become man and written word. That is the only objective philosophical attitude,'

he adds, 'for it alone does justice to the uniqueness of the object.'<sup>2</sup>

But as we know too well there is a study and a learning even of the Scriptures which can shut the Kingdom of Heaven against men. The scholar can fail to enter in and make it impossible for others to do so.<sup>3</sup> It is possible to allow our receptivity to be dulled by the reservation we necessarily and rightly have in our study of the Word of man. Somewhere along the line (to continue von Balthasar's words) 'we must hand ourselves over in humility, naked and unprotected, exposed like a sensitive photographic plate to the objective image of Himself in the world'.<sup>4</sup> In other words, in study there is the need of an openness which is the very ground of prayer so that we do not misuse theology to safeguard ourselves from God. Keeness of intellect could find itself parrying with the two-edged sword of the Word of God, and make it possible to forgo that operation of the knife that wounds and heals. One is reminded of Kierkegaard's scorn for those commentaries of much learning and little substance. He compares them to the blotting paper which an ingenious boy puts in the seat of his pants so that the master's cane cannot come in direct contact with his bottom.

It would be a disservice to God and man to suggest in all this that there is any underestimating or devaluing of the need for patient honesty towards both man and God. The love of God we encounter in prayer is not alien to, external to or inimical to the intellectual humility and honesty required of us when we have to let things and people speak for themselves. It is nowhere so true as in theology that we need fearless liberation from our own ideas and presuppositions. If then we are free to hear God we should also be free to hear men as well. If the truth of God can only be held faithfully by preferring a lie to the facts then let us be finished here and join another faculty. But this comes from a false alternative – of devout committed partiality which protects itself from anything that an honest mind can discover, and detached uninvolved impartiality which fearlessly follows where the facts lead. But fearlessness, honesty, patience, and humility belong to the good and perfect gifts which are from above and come down from the Father of lights who has delivered us from our enemies so that we can serve Him without fear, with the mind as well as the heart. That man is to be suspected whose knowledge of the love of God in Christ allows him to be less than scrupulously honest with what he sees, fair with the method he uses to discover the history of documents or events or in the way in which he deals with his opponents. Suspect also must be the theologian, however prayerful, whose humility before God is not matched by humility before men. It was after all that lover of God and theologian, St. Thomas Aquinas, who left us the prayer that 'we should hold nothing rashly, nothing obstinately'. Where we find ourselves shirking the

intellectual hardships that require patience and self-effacement or inclined to cheat, then we need to pray for deliverance from sloth and fear which hide behind a piety which is less than a bold faith in God who needs no protection from our intellectual shiftiness. True faith in God can be combined with quite a good deal of healthy scepticism – in fact true faith assumes it. A true theologian is one on whose tombstone could be written the lines that concluded *The Times* obituary notice of the greatest of my teachers, Fr. Herbert Kelly, S.S.M. They read: 'He believed in God and precious little else'.

This prayer which waits upon God for the gifts of patience, and honesty in dealing with men's words and waits on God emptily to hear his Word or with fullness of heart in adoration will also wait upon God for forgiveness. The student of theology has his own particular sins which need the daily forgiveness of Christ or they will lead us into death of mind and heart. They spring from fear, jealousy, pride, falsehood and sloth. For every intellectual publican you can find an intellectual Pharisee with his own subtle pride in integrity that makes him unbearable to God and man.

To a plea for forgiveness for our sins as students, we shall often need to add the anguished cry of *Kyrie Eleison* when we get lost in a mass of abstraction and statistics, and we lose the path not only towards God but towards a humility underfed, ill-housed, war-weary and brutalized. At times for us all I hope it will appear intolerable when in our cosy, leisured, well-heated, well-fed, comfort here the spectre of the toil and tears of millions, who hardly know their right hand from their left, rises up and reproachfully haunts us. Karl Barth has left us a couple of pages in his *Evangelical Theology* which in their poignancy are unforgettable.

*There*, (he writes) in the world, are the murderers and murdered in concentration camps – *there* are Hiroshima, Algeria and Congo – *there* is the stubbornly promoted end to all life on our planet. *Here*, however, there is a little demythologising in Marburg, a little Church Dogmatics in Basel, *here* are ecumenical discussions and Church councils – not to be disparaged but *Kyrie Eleison!* What *is* the relationship between all this and what is simultaneously happening *there*? Is not all theology distinguished by the fact that in the shadow of the great need of the world and also of the Church, it seems to have so much leisure, and so little haste? I draw (he adds) no conclusion not even such as those of the young man who proposed to me, in a friendly manner, that I should burn all my books. But they are urgent questions and represent a form of the wrath of God.<sup>5</sup>

Such reflections rebuke our Western individualism which blights both our prayer and our theology. We find it difficult to understand

that prayer and theology both have their common matrix in a community and their relation to one another can be understood only by the common life of a humanity which is the primary creation of the revealed love of God, in both Israel and the Church. Prayer and theology both require a self-renunciation – a self-oblivion which, primarily takes place in the remembrance of and the being caught up in the self-oblivion of the sacrifice of Christ, in the self-offering of the people of God. In the eucharist the community seeks only to glorify God in adoration, praise and thanksgiving. Here is the void acknowledged by petition where we ask God to cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by His Holy Spirit. Here the community receives the Word as word and the Word as flesh and blood. Here takes place the reasonable service of souls and bodies where all is made possible by the pure and only complete and saving sacrifice of the mind and heart of Jesus Christ. Here is not only symbolized but effected in His humanity that reconciliation of heart and mind which remains threatened and imperfect in our isolated lives. It is out of this eucharistic community that the great theologians of the church have come. Most of the documents of the faith were written either for such an assembly or out of the community for the community. We may do all sorts of things under all sorts of lights in the study but we finally see them under the light of the celebration of the acts of God by the people of God. The very opening words of Genesis were clearly written for and in the light of such celebrations and the last words of the New Testament were written in the light of that city and day of the Lord ‘that needs no light of the sun, for the Lord God and the Lamb are the light thereof . . .’ and all this got together in the loneliness of exile in Babylon and Patmos. Neither Athanasius or Anselm, Basil or Bonaventura, Cyril or Calvin prayed or studied outside the context of the people of God whose right thinking and right loving come together in the thoughts and love of the Son of God and the Holy Spirit. If, as they do, these writers pass from thought into prayer and praise they do this with the easiness of men for whom worship and work find their unity in the worship and work of the Son of God. In other words, theological study and the prayer that precedes, grows out of, and follows it, presupposes the community and the celebration of praise.

However much time we spend as we must in the privacy of study, there is no place in Christian theology for the tradition of the solitary philosopher, the recluse living in the ivory towers of academia. We are members of the Body of Christ, members of one another, and exist to serve the world of dying men. It is this corporate prayer united to the prayer of Christ that gives meaning to our multiform studies, to the hours of solitary reading and pondering, to the maze and labyrinth of historical research. There where we

are told to lift up our hearts we have an aerial reconnaissance view of the ground we so painfully toil across and the mountains we so warily climb. We cannot separate the two ways of knowing though the appearances of such separation rise up to frighten us. It is the reality of the mountain itself that establishes the bond between the vision and the toil – both the vision and the toil are ways of ‘enjoying’ the mountain.

But if prayer often admits us to vision, it is theology that humbles us as we have to admit to seeing through a glass darkly, where sometimes as indeed in prayer the absence of God is the only form of His presence. Commitment to truth will cost us dearly in self-renunciation and in the pain of losing what we held most dear. The death-resurrection pattern of the Gospel can be detected in the demands made on the intellect in its commitment to the Truth and to Him who is the Truth. Peace of mind is no easy prize gained by the lucky student who knows all before he starts, but is often the gift that is beyond understanding – a gift of *pax inter spinas*, of peace amid the thorns. Theology can therefore throw light on the dark experiences of valid prayer, for it too deals with God’s concealment as well as his manifestation. The psalms of abandonment, the experiences of Job and Jeremiah, the dereliction of Christ Himself have to be understood theologically rather than psychologically. The dialectic between the manifestation of wisdom in nature testified by the Psalmist, and the words of Job on the other hand, ‘The depth says it not in me and the sea says it is not in me – it is hid from the eyes of all living’<sup>6</sup> has its central place in theology and it throws light on the similar dialectic in prayer. Both heart and mind can come to death and burial in order to rise to newness of life. The Christian, neither in his thinking nor in his prayer, can escape the tension between heaven and earth, between cross and resurrection.

In all this talk of the material help of prayer and of theology, it would perhaps be as well to make it plain that prayer is not primarily a means even to making the complete theologian – it is an end in itself. Prayer is no mere subsidium for life : it *is* our life – our fellowship with the Father and the Son in the Spirit. God is loved and adored for his own sake, just as He loved us for ours. If any man wants to claim the same finality for theology we will not quarrel. The medieval controversy over the primacy of the understanding or of the will very often ignored the unity of love and knowledge in God who is both Light and Fire, Truth and Life and wills to be both for us. In the light of the final vision of God’s reality we can readily understand the meaning of St. Thomas Aquinas’ dying words to Brother Raymond (often misused by the anti-rationals): ‘In the light of what I have seen, my work appears like a straw’.

I have spoken of the Fathers of the Church and how their study was impregnated with prayer, how their work was set within the context of the community of praise. Prayer for them welled up spontaneously as they wrote. This summer there was published a book in the Penguin Classics which not only illustrates a theologian at prayer but is in itself a useful prayer book for theologians. It is the English translation of *The Prayer and Meditations of S. Anselm*, prepared by Benedicta Ward of the Sisters of the Love of God. In her introduction, she writes of Cyprian, Irenaeus and Origen. For these men, she says, 'theology was a hymn, a prayer – the point where knowledge and love become praise'. She quotes Origen breaking off from his commentary on St. John's account of the foot washing, with the prayer 'Jesus, my feet are dirty. Come and be my slave, pour water into your basin and wash my feet' and St. Hilary breaking off in the middle of a discourse on the Trinity with the words: 'Almighty God, bestow on us the meaning of words, the light of understanding and faith of the true nature and grant that what we believe we may also speak'.<sup>7</sup> In the body of the book we overhear St. Anselm at prayer. 'Lord, may I exist and think according to your will, purely, soberly, devoutly, and with a true and effective mind. Let me go with humility to better things and do not give me up either to my ignorance or to my weakness.' It is in the *Proslogion* that we find the pattern prayer that has itself been nourished by Theology and is theology.

This is the prayer of a man about to put forward a reason for the existence of God that has kept both theologian and philosopher occupied until this very day.

Come now little man, (he prays)  
 turn aside for a while from your daily task  
 escape for a moment from the tumult of your thoughts  
 Free yourself awhile for God  
 Rest awhile in Him  
 Shut out everything except God,  
 and that which can help you to find Him.  
 When you have shut the door . . .  
 Say to God, I seek your face,  
 Lord, it is your face I seek.<sup>7</sup>

and further he prays:

I cannot seek you unless you show me how.  
 I will never find you  
 unless you shew yourself to me.<sup>8</sup>

and famously he prays:

I am not trying to make my way to your light  
 I desire just to understand a little of your truth  
 which my heart already believes and loves.  
 I do not seek to understand that I may believe  
 But I believe so that I may understand.  
 What is more,  
 I believe that unless I believe, I shall not understand.<sup>9</sup>

Here is a man who wants to go one further than the author of the *Imitation of Christ* who said 'I would rather feel compunction than know its definition'.<sup>10</sup> Anselm wants to do both and he knows he needs to be led to both. After all, *sapientia* (wisdom) is a cognate of *sapio* (I taste).

It is not at all certain whether Anselm would have been invited to join the Royal Society. When the Society was set up on 15 July 1662 with a charter from Charles II, it chose as its motto some words from one of Horace's letters: 'The words are the words of a Master but we are not compelled to swear by them. Instead we are borne wherever experiment drives us' and Sir William Petty, a founder member, expressed the opinion that St. Andrew's Day fixed for their Annual General Meeting, should be changed to St. Thomas's Day. Anselm believed in the order 'Taste and see', but he would have been happy with St. Thomas's Day only if it celebrated not Thomas's wish to see and handle, but the Lord's promise of the blessing on 'those who believe and have never seen'.

But perhaps more important than belonging to the Royal Society is the theologian's privilege to belong to that society whose charter has these words of its King, which reduce all schools of divinity to size: 'I thank you Father that you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will,<sup>11</sup> for only the Son has knowledge of the Father as only the Father has knowledge of the Son in that perfect union of love-knowledge which is the Spirit: and *we* have received the Spirit that is from God that we might understand the gift bestowed on us by God.' That is why the true relation between prayer and study, between love and knowledge, is to be found in the object of both, in the nature of the gift of God, rather than in our subjective apprehension, and that is why we can only impart this understanding ultimately 'not in words taught by human wisdom, but taught by the Spirit, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God'.<sup>12</sup>

#### NOTES

1. I Thess. 2:13.
2. Hans Urs von Balthasar; *Prayer*, pp. 178-9.
3. Cf. Matt. 23:13.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

5. Op. cit., pp. 134-5.
6. Job 28:14.
7. Ibid., p. 239.
8. P. 243.
9. P. 244.
10. Op. cit., Book I, i, 3.
11. Matt. 11:25.
12. I Cor. 2:13 and 5.

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