

## Prayer

Rahner's doctrine of God provides a solid foundation for the Christian practice of prayer. For him, prayer can be grasped as meaningful only in its actual practice. Prayer is a fundamental act of human existence which "must be its own justification and advertisement." It is the central religious practice which acknowledges our complete dependence on the triune God. Rahner wrote many scholarly articles about prayer and once described his book *On Prayer* as one of the best statements of his theology. At the same time, he often insisted that what we say in prayer is far more important than what we say about prayer. Prayer addressed to God involves a relationship which remains ultimately mysterious. Some of Rahner's important material on prayer can be summarized in the following five dialectical pairs. Each pairing contains a contemporary challenge to authentic prayer, a theological perspective, an example from the prayer life of Jesus and a prayer of my composition, usually a paraphrase or rewording of one of Rahner's own prayers.

1. Prayer lifts our minds and hearts to the God above and fosters familiar conversation with the God within. Our challenge is to develop a more mature prayer life that retains a childlike confidence in the Father who loves us. Rahner's theology reminds us that God is both the transcendent Mystery that rules the universe and the intimate Presence that sustains and guides us. The Gospels tell us that Jesus committed himself totally to the will of the God who sent him to establish the kingdom and, at the same time, addressed the sovereign Lord as "Abba," the familiar term, like Daddy or Papa, used by children for their fathers.

*Thank you Abba for revealing Yourself to me in my everyday experiences of joy and suffering. You have taken the initiative and become the true center of my existence. May I remain ever mindful of this great gift.*

2. Prayer is both a gift and an expression of our freedom. According to Rahner, our challenge is to avoid a false pride that sees our prayer as a personal accomplishment and a paralyzing quietism that absolves us of all responsibility to develop a viable prayer life. Scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit prays in us enabling us to address God as Father, which reminds us that all prayer is a gift. At the same time, we are free persons, called to responsible cooperation with the Spirit in the process of responding to the God who calls us by name. Jesus received the Spirit at his baptism by John in the Jordan River. This Spirit

drove him into the desert where he prayed in preparation for his battle with Satan. During his ministry, he prayed for individuals and shared his healing spirit with them. Faithful to the Spirit, Jesus freely accepted death on a cross and in the process became life-giving spirit for the whole human family.

*I must stop the busy routine for a moment and address words of praise to You, Holy Spirit, living within me. I adore you as the Light that illumines my dark moments, the Compass who guides me along the path of moral decisions, the Hope that sustains me when stalked by despair, the Love that propels me out of selfishness into life-giving relationships, and the Power that enables all my prayers. Help me recognize and praise you as the Gift of my life and the Source of my being.*

3. Prayer involves a unity of interior sentiments and external expressions. Some of us say prayers regularly and struggle to mean what we say, while others have a rich interior life that remains unexpressed. We are enfleshed spirits and our bodies are symbols of our souls. To achieve integration, we strive for a fruitful interplay between inner sentiments and external gesture, at the same time accepting the inevitable gap between the two. The quest for a totally authentic prayer life inevitably finds us disappointed, as Rahner the sober realist, reminds us. Ideally, we gradually come to a greater realization of our total dependency upon the God who rules our lives, and find more helpful ways of improving our prayer lives: for example learning various meditation techniques, finding the best places and times for private prayer, and participating wholeheartedly in liturgy. Jesus lived constantly out of his Abba experience of total intimacy with God, which energized his complete dedication to the cause of God and humanity. He expressed and deepened this fundamental relationship by participating in the great Jewish feasts and by carving out private prayer time in the midst of his demanding ministry.

*God, sometimes the demands and responsibilities crowd out my awareness of your constant presence. Please make my meditation time more fruitful so that I am*

*more mindful throughout my busy day that I am never alone, but always carried by your loving embrace. Help me to learn from your Son and my Lord to walk always in your presence and to find time and place to nourish my spirit.*

4. Prayer is both private and communal. A growing number of believers today find comfort and solace in prayerful reflection, but are not comfortable praying in groups or in formal liturgy. Some regular church goers have difficulty finding connections between liturgical prayer and their private devotional life. Rahner insists that we are essentially social beings who grow as persons in and through various communities, including the family, intermediate associations and the local church. We meet God in the sanctuary of our hearts as well as the church sanctuary. In prayer, we have the opportunity to encounter Christ our brother and to participate in the life of his body, the Church. Our moments alone with God should prepare us for public worship and communal prayer should nourish our spiritual life. The Gospels, especially Luke, tell us that Jesus sought opportunities to engage in private prayer and prayed before key decisions, like calling his disciples. Jesus also appreciated the value of communal prayer as suggested by his participation in formal Jewish worship and by his request that the disciples pray with him during his Agony in the Garden.

*Gracious God, O Lord, when we share in the Eucharistic meal Your Son comes to us as our nourishment and we become what we eat, the Body of Christ. May what we celebrate in the sacred liturgy always be enacted in the daily witness of our everyday lives with its mix of hard work and moments of prayerful reflection.*

5. Prayer includes adoration and petition. Some Christians have to admit that most of their prayers are devoted to asking God for things they desire for themselves or others, while rarely offering prayers of praise or thanksgiving to God. Other Christians who have grown to reject crude notions of an intervening God now find themselves questioning the value of petitionary prayer. This problem demands a more extensive treatment, especially since Rahner's doctrine of God has helped create this difficulty. Prayer is a form of truth telling that gives expression to the fact that we are totally dependent on a Power greater than ourselves. All that we are and have is a gift. Prayers of praise to

the Lord of the cosmos and gratitude to the Giver of all gifts gives expression to these fundamental truths. As Rahner put it, prayer of adoration is “the last moment of speech before silence,” the final reflection before abandoning ourselves to the Gracious Mystery beyond all comprehension. Moreover, it is God who makes our prayer of praise possible, empowered by the Spirit who lives within us and instructed by Christ who invites us to give glory to our Father. The regular practice of prayer not only gives expression to our sense of dependency but helps strengthen and intensify it. In and through this process, we develop our true freedom and a proper sense of responsibility for ourselves as a whole. From this perspective, prayer appears as essential to our own spiritual growth. Liturgical prayer is not simply a device for community building but an essential act of communal worship offered to God, who can be addressed as our Father through Christ and empowered by the Spirit.

#### Divine Intervention

Questions about petitionary prayer arise from Rahner’s doctrine of God, which challenges the popular notion that God intervenes periodically in human affairs in response to requests from faithful people. For Rahner, God cannot intervene now and then because God is always already present in the whole of human history as the Source and Goal of all human activities. The gracious One is always on the side of good in the struggle against evil, always present to us as the Power that sustains and guides us. The God who raised Jesus to life never abandons us and always supports us. Through his paschal mystery, Christ is present to all people in all places and all times as the absolute savior and definitive prophet. The Holy Spirit anoints all people and not just a select group of believers. Divine grace is omnipresent like the air we breathe. The human opportunity and task is to cooperate with the God who wants good for us, to follow the example of Christ who planted the seeds of the final victory over evil powers, and to tap the power of the Holy Spirit who is our Advocate in the ongoing struggle against demonic forces. Rahner warns us not to think of the sufferings of life as a divine punishment for our sins or as a test of our virtue. When afflicted, it is natural to ask why, but far more beneficial to ask how - - how can we cope with the inevitable sufferings of life, trusting that God is with us and for us in the great struggle against all the dark forces.

#### A Defense of Petitionary Prayer

Within this theological framework Rahner offers a vigorous defense of petitionary prayer. The Hebrew Scriptures, especially the Psalms, are filled with explicit petitions, asking God for specific help. In the Gospels, Jesus urges his disciples to ask for divine favors with great confidence that the Father hears our prayers. He taught us to pray the Our Father with its petitions for daily bread, forgiveness for sins and deliverance from temptation. Jesus himself responded to faith filled requests for healing. In offering prayers of petition, Rahner reminds us to begin by surrendering to God's will, as Jesus taught us in the Lord's Prayer. "Thy will be done" precedes "give us this day our daily bread." A proper surrender of will means: letting go of the desired results and not making an idol out of what we desire; overcoming the temptation to manipulate God or achieve a magical result; and recognizing that our prayer might be answered in different ways than we envision.

After surrender to God's will, we can place ourselves before God with all our concrete needs, desires, fears and burdens. This is not an inferior form of prayer and in a way involves a type of praise by recognizing that God is the true source of all blessings. Petitions involve a healthy sense of call and response, since God first speaks to us, calling us by name in the very act of sustaining us in life. By raising Jesus to a glorified life, God has already answered the deepest longings of our heart in the most radical way. The resurrection is the ultimate positive response to the petition that we are, expressed by our desire for personal happiness, loving relationships and a more just and peaceful world. As Christians, we believe God is personally involved in human affairs. Rahner insists that there is an orthodox way of speaking about God changing for the sake of human beings, as happened in the Incarnation with the Logos taking on human flesh for the first time during the reign of Caesar Augustus. Rahner's notion that "God changes in the other" sets a frame for thinking about the dynamics of petitionary prayer, without relapsing into a crude interventionist notion of divine providence.

### One Human Family

As members of the one human family of God, we are all connected by bonds that are deeper and more significant than all the differences that divide us. Christ died and rose for all people and the Holy Spirit animates and unites the whole universe and all the inhabitants of spaceship earth. As interconnected persons, we have the power to influence one another. Sometimes the influence is perceptible: for example, when a young Pakistani girl speaks up for the importance of education for women and continues the crusade after being shot in the head, we all benefit. We can imagine an

African American high school student praying for the Pakistani girl and in the process finding motivation to go to college herself. Another example: a husband prays for reconciliation with his wife after a serious dispute. His prayer moves him to apologize and her to accept his overture, leading to a reconciled relationship, an answer to prayer. Many times, however, the causal connections engendered by petitionary prayer are not evident, but this does not mean that no connections exist. We can assume that the deep relationships forged by the Spirit among all human beings enable some transfer of positive energy between individuals and groups, however mysterious the process might be. Prayers for others in need and for worthwhile causes operate on that assumption, trusting that the Spirit works for the good of all.

### Prayer and Miracles

Rahner insists that effective petitionary prayer does not involve a miraculous breaking of the laws of nature. For him, miracles are signs of the presence of the reign of God, as John's Gospel makes clear. Miracles occur when individual believers detect the hand of God at work in a special way in particular events. The material world is open to spiritual energy. The laws of nature contain more potential developments than scientific inquiry currently recognizes. In petitionary prayer, we are not asking for God to break the laws of nature, but for the gift of openness to the often surprising power of the Spirit.

Practically, prayer of petition has important positive consequences: reminding us of our complete dependence on God and our personal limitations; alerting us to problems in the world as when we pray for people starving or suffering from local wars; moving us to constructive action to help ourselves and others; and opening our minds and hearts to greater cooperation with God's grace in the great task of humanizing our world.

*Gracious God, I adore you as the Lord of the stars. I praise you as the source of all beauty. I worship you as the Fulfillment of my longings. I thank you as the Giver of all good gifts. I put before you my prayers for a peaceful heart, loving relationships and a just world. I realize these are gifts from you, and that I must cooperate with your grace in pursuing them. All my words of adoration and petition seem so feeble. They seem to float off into empty space. Please help me persevere in lifting my mind*

*and heart to you.*