

Prayer, the Search  
for Authenticity

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*THE COMPATIBILITY  
OF AUTHENTIC PRAYER  
AND HUMAN SINFULNESS*

Most of us, at some time or other, have seen a prayerful person suddenly act in a very unchristian way. Or perhaps it was we ourselves, prayerful though we were, who turned viciously upon our fellowman and did him an injury. This may even have happened shortly after we had experienced a great grace of prayer, or a profound intimacy with the Eucharistic Lord.

What are we to think of the prayer of a person who thus sins against his neighbor? Are we to conclude immediately that it was not prayer at all, but was sheer hypocrisy or self-deception?

Is it not unjust and sinful on our part to brand as hypocrites those who pray assiduously even though they are not yet perfect in their love and service of their fellowmen? Is it right to demand that these people stop praying and

approaching the Eucharist until they have overcome all their failings? For some of us have gone to the absurd extreme of condemning all prayer and liturgy and religion simply because many Christians are still imperfect in love. Is it right to condemn prayer just because men of prayer sometimes fall into sin?

And are we wise in abandoning prayer just because we discover that we ourselves have deep-seated faults and sinful tendencies? When through the experience of falling into sin in times of stress we come to realize how weak and sinful we really are, should we therefore conclude that all our previous prayer was only self-deception, and that God had not really been with us? In discouragement over our sins, should we abandon prayer as being hypocrisy? In the desire for authenticity, should we give up prayer as being self-deception, since we are really sinners and therefore not as close to God as we thought we were?

Some contemporary religious have made this mistake. When they experienced their sinfulness through their falls, in spite of years of effort at prayer, they have mistakenly concluded that their earlier prayer experiences were self-deception, and have foolishly repudiated, as fostering hypocrisy, the traditional religious forms of prayer and aids to prayer. "Self-deception" is the name they give to prayer when they find so many faults in themselves in spite of their past efforts to pray, or when they see so much lack of Christian love in others who pray.

To conclude that the prayer of an imperfect man is self-deception, or to call a prayerful man a hypocrite just because in weakness he occasionally falls into sin, is to insult the Holy Spirit of grace and the God of love. For prayer is a gift of God's grace, and it is God who takes the initiative

in prayer, offering the grace of prayer even to sinners and to the imperfect. Prayer is one of the best remedies for sinfulness and imperfection, and it is not hypocrisy for a sinner to pray. The grace of prayer is a call to conversion, an invitation to turn more deeply to God in love and to turn away from the ways of sin. It is quite normal, then, that a person, though still very imperfect in love of neighbor, should pray sincerely and even experience God in prayer.

But if such a prayerful experience is really a call to conversion and to greater love of God, how can a person possibly sin against his neighbor soon after praying? If his experience of God in prayer was truly authentic, how could he possibly be unloving when he meets his fellowman? If God's presence and grace was truly working in him in prayer, does this not mean that God's grace then abandoned him, that he should sin against his neighbor?

To expect that an authentic grace of prayer should make us thenceforth totally sinless is like blaming the Holy Spirit for our sins, as if his grace did not really work. It is like condemning him for not giving us so miraculous a grace that we could never sin again once we had had some taste of God in prayer. This is like expecting his grace to make consummate saints of us in a flash, without our cooperation.

His graces of prayer, however, are a call for our cooperation, they are invitations to greater love on our part, they are a summons to correct ourselves, an appeal to us to make the gift of self to God on a more profound level than we have ever made it before.

Thus, if it should happen that I fall into sin on the very day on which I have enjoyed a grace of deep prayer, this does not prove that the prayer was only self-deception, nor does it necessarily mean that God's grace which was with me has

now abandoned me. For the very permission of God which allowed me to sin against my neighbor could, in a sense, have been a blessing. For my fall may have revealed to me how weak and imperfect I really am by myself; it may have shown me in a deeply experiential way how shallow my love for God really has been; it may have manifested that I have not yet given myself to God in the totality of my being, from every level of my existence, with my whole heart and soul and mind and strength.

Perhaps in the depths of my spirit where God is found I really did experience the presence of God in my moments of prayer or eucharistic intimacy. But when I returned to more superficial levels of my being, as I went about my daily work and came into conflict with my neighbor, in weakness I fell. Though my situation in regard to my neighbor called for a new gift of myself to God by giving myself to him (and I ought to have been able to do it in the strength of my previous experiences of God), I failed to make the gift of self, I did not give myself on this level of my existence.

By my fall, and in my dawning repentance for it, it was brought home to me once again that God wants the totality of my life and being, not just the "fine point" of my spirit where I meet him in the deeper experiences of explicit prayer. He desires that everything I do and every human relationship in which I engage should be an expression of love for him.

Thus my sin against my neighbor even after I had prayed does not prove that the prayer was merely self-deception and that therefore I should stop praying if I wish to be authentic. My sin certainly shows that I do not yet love God with the totality of my being, with my whole heart and soul

and mind and strength, it shows that my gift of self to him is not yet complete. But it does not necessarily mean that he had not truly given himself to me in the grace of prayer, nor does it mean that I had not given myself to him in response, surrendering myself to him in that grace of prayer. It does show, however, that I still have a long way to go in my spiritual combat; it does mean that the Lord will have to continue to pursue me with his invitations of love, his calls to prayer and to repeated conversion.

It is very wrong, then, for me to abandon prayer in discouragement over my sins. My continuing human weaknesses and my sins do not necessarily mean that my prayer has been hypocrisy and self-deception, and that therefore, for the sake of authenticity, I must abandon prayer till I have straightened out all my faults.

On the contrary, even though my repeated failures show that the graces of prayer and of Eucharistic participation do not work as infallible magic in correcting my moral defects but call for my responsible cooperation, still my responsible action in conquering my sins and in loving my neighbor can fully succeed only by the grace of continuing prayer and sacramental participation.

To abandon prayer just because I have sinned or have not yet fulfilled all my social responsibilities, or to claim that because I have failed my prayer must have been hypocrisy and self-deception, is, we said, an insult to the Holy Spirit who gives graces of prayer even to men who are sinners, thus inviting them to an ever fuller conversion.

In times of failure and discouragement, far from doubting or denying the reality of my past experiences of God in prayer, I should gratefully remember these experiences and give thanks to God for them, for they were a pledge of his

everlasting love for me though I was still such a weak human being; they were an invitation to continue to seek him even from the midst of my failures; they contained promise of greater graces to come if I would continue to respond to them in times of darkness as well as in times of light. I should remember the love which was concerned about me and was revealing itself to me long before I learned from the sad experience of sin how weak I really am and how much I need that love. I should praise that love which continues to be concerned about me now that I do know my weakness, that love which is ready to lift me up if I continue to seek him in humility, even though of myself I am so unworthy of his love.

This remembrance of my prayerful experiences of God in the past will save me from discouragement over my sins and from a lethal loss of self-esteem. For though I am a sinner, the remembrance of the love which the faithful God has shown me in the past will give me a sense of self-worth, bringing me the courage to start over again in repentance and renewed love.

The experience of my sinful helplessness and the remembrance of God's love for me will give rise in me to anagogical love—the love which humbly reaches to God in faith and hope and finds courage and healing strength in him. Thus discouragement is defeated and the prayer of anagogical love conquers my sinfulness.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, even in my condition as a sinner I must pray, and my prayer will not be self-deception. For in the faith, hope,

<sup>49</sup> Anagogical love is described in "Spiritual Sayings Attributed to John of the Cross," *The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross*, III, translated by E. Allison Peers (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1953), pp. 289-291.

charity and humility which are the ingredients of anagogical love, I truly experience the God of love giving me the grace of prayerful repentance and courageous hope.

Nor will this seeking of intimacy with God even from the depths of my weakness and failings be hypocrisy, for by his grace I will be laboring to master my failings and to be reconciled with the neighbor whom perhaps I have injured by my sin. I must pray for the grace of reconciliation with my brother. I must prayerfully mediate upon ways of resolving my conflict with him. I must think out what is wrong in my relationships with him. In the presence of the Lord, I must try to discover what is wrong in me as well as what is wrong in my brother. And by meditating upon the Lord's will that I be reconciled with him, I must find the courage to seek the reconciliation.

It is indeed true, then, that I must strive to resolve my conflicts with my fellowmen and I must fulfill my various social responsibilities to the best of my ability if I am to hope for deepening relationships with God. But this does not mean that I must stop praying and receiving the Eucharist until all my relationships with my fellowmen have been completely perfected. The Eucharist will give me grace to bring these relationships to perfection.

Imperfect relationships with my fellowmen do indeed mean imperfect relationships with God—to the extent that these bad relationships with my fellowmen involve guilt on my part. But I will never achieve perfect relationships with God unless even now, while my relationships with him are still poor, I approach him in prayer in the hope of achieving an ever fuller reconciliation with him and my fellowmen.

So pray I must, even when I am a sinner, and my prayer

need not be hypocrisy or self-deception! The prayer of anagogical love is shot through with humility and sincerity. It is weak man's cry of hope to the God of love and reconciliation.

This prayer of hope and the grace it wins entails a responsibility—the obligation to mortify the pride, the laziness, the envy, the lust, or whatever it is which stands between me and God or neighbor.

There can be no growth in deeper relationships with God without this effort at mortification of all within me which tends to resist God. But this is not to say that the merciful Lord will not give me authentic graces of prayer even before the total purification of self has been completed. For the very grace of repentance and the effort at continuing conversion is a response to the initiatives of God's love, it is a prayer in response to a taste of his goodness.

To claim, then, that the prayer of a sinner is hypocrisy, and to say that authentic prayer and human sinfulness are incompatible, is to say that prayer is impossible to man on earth. For who among us can say that he is without sin?

In the story of the two men who went up to the temple to pray, it was the prayer of the sinner which Jesus praised as accepted by God. "O God, be merciful to me a sinner!" (Lk. 18:13).