

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

Prayer: A Call to Action and Reflection

Few persons in history have matched the courage and the articulateness of St. Ignatius of Antioch. Heir to the spirit of the first martyr, St. Stephen, he flashes across the pages of second century history like a meteor.



His itinerary of martyrdom, from Antioch to Rome, is chronicled by a series of letters that are prayerful, unflinching, eloquent. At one point he writes: "I hear within myself something like a sound of running water which says: Come to the Father!"

The statement is a dual proclamation: prayer is a gift and a call; witness (and its highest form, martyrdom) is the

work of the Spirit.

Anyone who ponders the Gospel ministry of Jesus is amazed at how much time the Savior spent in doing what many are inclined to regard as absolutely nothing. Withdrawal for prayer was a regular pattern. Sometimes by himself, sometimes with a few intimate friends, sometimes with all twelve disciples. The place varied—the wilderness, a lonely place, a mountaintop, even a fishing boat. The duration might be an hour, at times the entire night.

Before choosing his disciples Jesus spent the entire night in prayer (Lk 6:12-16). Key decisions came after prayerful preludes. Engagement in ministry flowed from intimacy with his heavenly Father. Action and reflection were never separated into airtight compartments. Prayer was the mainstay of his mission. In a word, the parentheses of prayer made the syntax of Jesus' ministry clear, full, deep.

The opening chapter of Mark's Gospel suggests the breathless pace of Jesus' involvement: he commences preaching, he calls his disciples from their nets, he cures Peter's mother-in-law, he heals scores of others, he departs Capernaum, he traverses Galilee, he restores a leper to health. For all of this flurry of activities there are clear, recurring calls to prayer. There is a prayer-filled stay in the desert, a visit to the Capernaum synagogue, a retreat to a lonely place long before dawn one morning.

Matthew's recital of Jesus' mission depicts no less a hectic pace. After the harsh news of the Baptizer's death, Jesus withdraws to an isolated spot along the shoreline of Lake Tiberius. The crowds encroach upon his prayerful retreat. After healing their sick, he responds to their physical hunger—equally a sign of his sensitivity and of his power. A young boy's lunch—consisting of five loaves and two fishes—is the extent of Jesus' provision. He satisfies the bodily need of the large mob—and then goes off to attend to his own

spiritual hunger. He walks among the hills in solitary contemplation.

On the occasion of the transfiguration, Jesus departs from a large crowd of needy people in the valley. With his three disciples he climbs a mountain peak to pray. The symbolism of temporary detachment and deliberate effort fits so aptly. The marvelous epiphany takes place—to the speechless wonderment of the apostles. Peter proposes that the four do not return to the work-a-day world. The proposal results from narrowness of vision, and Jesus tags it a mistake. No less a mistake would have been their not having come in the first place. As the foursome return to the valley, Jesus finds a large crowd gathered around the distraught father of an epileptic child. Anger runs high in the crowd over the disciples' inability to respond to the need. The cure follows and, when the disciples ask why they have had no success, Jesus replies: "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer." (Mk 9:29) The relationship between mountaintop and valley becomes immediately clear.

Indeed, the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry finds him absorbed in prayer in the wilderness of Juda. His prayer offsets the temptations of Satan. These encounters become a sign of his complete victory at the end of the ministry. But even here, prayer becomes the effective instrument of Jesus' victory. In the garden what passes for absolute human failure is turned eventually into triumph. Jesus meets the hour of darkness with a prayer of self-conquest and perfect surrender to the divine will: "Father, not my will, but yours be done!" More than prayer formula, the experience enables Jesus to drain the cup of suffering to its very dregs. And if the night seems all the darker for this prayerful acceptance of human failure, the shadows of Gethsemane provide the backdrop for the gleaming splendors of Resurrection morning. Thus, having wrestled like another Jacob in the nighttime, Jesus rises empowered to carry out God's most powerful conspiracy against evil.

The following afternoon, on the cross, prayer is a dominant feature of those hours of heightening pain and declining life. Of his seven last words three are magnificent prayers: one a plea of forgiveness for his enemies, one a cry of dependency on the Father, one a commitment of his dying breath. (See Lk 23:34,43,46) A hardened Roman soldier hears those cries, and as the innocence of the central victim becomes a growing conviction, he falls to his knees in God's presence.

Prayer marked the beginning, middle and end of Jesus' ministry. It was the constant reference point of all he did and was.

During my ten years as seminary professor, I often thought that the curriculum might be enriched by a

detailed study of the attitudes and dynamics of Jesus' ministry. I may never have had the opportunity to realize that dream, but the conviction is firmly rooted in my heart. There is surely no better preparation for ministry than to explore, pray over and embody the mind-set of Jesus, man of prayer, man of action. Whatever other factors may have occurred during the public life of Jesus, his overarching motive was to introduce God into the experience of men and to bring men into the presence of God. Such, as I see it, is the dual purpose of ministry in any time and in any place of the Church's history. And both purposes become possible only through prayer and action.

The following points might help us during the season of Lent to focus our own commitment to prayer.

First, Jesus did not merely teach his disciples a theology of prayer or a formula for praying. The Lord's Prayer is the key to Jesus' spirituality, a pattern of his prayer experience, a distillation of the Gospel-life. Are we living it as well as we are praying it?

Second, the personal prayer life of Jesus, humanly speaking, blended integrally his need for reflection and his sense of mission. Prayer nurtured his humanness, clarified his directions, strengthened his choices. His human dimensions were rooted in dynamic prayer.

Third, the apparent silence of the Father in Gethsemane and on Calvary severely tested the spirit of Jesus and the disciples' understanding of the Master's teaching on the efficacy and meaning of prayer. Anguish and anxiety in prayer are not limited to later Christian centuries. They were integral part of Jesus' own life.

Fourth, the regularity and faithfulness of Jesus' prayer are summed up in this scriptural eulogy: "During his life on earth, he offered up prayer and entreaty, aloud and in silent tears, to the one who had the power to save him out of death, and he submitted so humbly that his prayer was heard. Although he was Son, he learnt to obey through suffering, but having been made perfect, he became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation and was acclaimed by God with the title of high priest of the order of Melchizedek. (Heb 5:7-10). In other words, the kingdom of God was established through the obedience of the Savior: a prayerful "Yes!" to the call to reflection, a dynamic "Yes!" to the call to action.

Fifth, Christian discipleship is a continuation of this call to prayer (through discernment, worship and vision) and of this call to action (through fortitude, witness and mission).

How well are we measuring up? May this Lent deepen your relationship to Christ.

Rebuild the Castle of Faith

During the general audience on Feb. 9, Pope Paul delivered the following address.

We think it opportune today, also for us who belong to the Church, to examine again and, if necessary, reconstruct the castle of our faith, and pass from the phase, which seems to become habitual, of a semi-darkness of religious opinions, uncertain and debatable and considered practically superfluous for modern life, to the state of certainty and clarity regarding our way of thinking and professing our religion.

There are so many intelligent and educated persons who, as far as religion is concerned, prefer to remain non-committal with regard to any religious stand that would demand an adherence such as one grants to truth. They limit themselves to some conventional expressions, of religiosity rather than of religion proper, expressions which are often rather passive, out of respect for their environment, or circumstances, than a firm and logical personal conviction, operating in moral life and practical conduct. They content themselves with a nominal conformism, manifested almost more out of regard for others than to commit themselves to a precise and organic conception of religion, unquestionable and binding.

This outlook, unfortunately, is often considered not a consequence of one's own ignorance, or one's own

superficiality in the religious field, but as maturity of thought and experience, almost as an aristocratic scepticism, or as a convenient and practical way to elude the thorny question which religion, if considered true and binding, poses to the major problems of life.

An example. If we ask a pupil of our catechetical schools what the world is, he will ask us what world do we mean: the one in which we live, or the one often mentioned in the Gospel? That is, the world which we can now describe as the cosmos, as heaven and earth? As the universe? Or as mankind? Or even as that part of mankind which opposes faith, the kingdom of God and Christ? We have already referred on other occasions to the plurality of meanings that this very common word may have; for the present let us give our attention to the world understood as the exterior and material reality in which we live. We see that the question at once becomes fundamental; it engages our thought, concerning the universal panorama of things, causes and events, the "self" and the values surrounding it. It demands an answer. If it were denied, the intelligibility of things would be compromised; if the latter were admitted anyhow, in an irrational way, the absurdity of the world would be justified. The world would be admitted either as lacking an explanation, that is, as a kingdom of darkness, a universal night, which it obviously is not, or as self-explanatory, as a pantheism which is an absurdity overwhelming all rationality, whereas the world is completely and extremely rational. It is the field of science; which is a pressing and urgent series of questions: why is it so?

transcendent explanation; it obliges us in the first place to affirm a dualism: I and the world; or to a synthesis, a principle to which must be subordinated both my thought and the reality of things, which thought discovers and does not invent, does not create. And so? Oh! The infinite ways that irradiate, like flashes bursting in emptiness; and the intelligence that has tried faithfully to follow some of these ways finds itself exalted in a very simple and formidable discovery: God exists, if I exist. That is, the grave and solemn words of our profession of faith returns to our lips: I believe in God, the creator of the world.

We are oversimplifying, we feel. But we are not distorting the truth. We are merely mentioning these problems, so that we may desire to take them up in our serious and manly consideration. Atheism, instead of frightening us, and paralyzing our thought with a pseudo-certainty, stimulates it. Even as men of pure rational thought, we must be seekers; and confronted with a century that is losing the meaning of everything we must confidently relight the lamp for our journey towards the Light of the World.

We wish the men of our time, the young especially, success in finding their way along the two paths which are perhaps nearest to their steps; the classical one of the causality of things, which, even today, seems the most convincing and the most accessible; and the path of aesthetical and ecstatic admiration of the universe which, as soon as we take it, delights us and exalts us, and dissolves in prayer the tiredness and darkness of our thought.

The word "world" brings us to the necessity of a God grant it be so! With our apostolic blessing!