

Institute '77

Prayer as Inner Experience

By MSGR. WILLIAM H. SHANNON

The essence of the New Law given to us by Jesus is that God dwells in our depths and that we must hear the voice of His Spirit calling to us from that depths. This is a revolutionary understanding of religion; for it makes religion first and foremost a matter of inner experience. The Sermon on the Mount interiorizes the religious experience. It tells us that it is not enough for us to obey external laws, however meticulously; we must have the dispositions of heart — poverty, meekness, purity — which make it possible for us to respond to a New Law that speaks ever so profoundly and ever so subtly in the deepest recesses of our being.

This, I suggest, represents an approach to religion so revolutionary that ever since the time of Jesus, His followers have been tempted to abandon the revolution and return to a more comfortable religion of external observances, wherein they are enslaved by an inexorable concern for all that is exterior, transient, illusory and ultimately trivial.

A few months ago I spent three days at the Thomas Merton Studies Center at Louisville, Ky. Much of the time I spent in studying an unpublished work of Thomas Merton. It was a book that he was still working on when he left for the Asian trip that brought his untimely death. The title of the book was "The Inner

Experience" and it contains Merton's most detailed discussions of a theme that is central to his understanding of prayer and faith, namely, the distinction between the inner self of man that alone is real in him and the false exterior self that is ultimately illusory.

The great task we face today as Christian men and women is the task of interiorization — the process whereby our prayer and our faith-life become what of necessity they must become if they are to be real — namely a matter of inner experience: the activity of the inner self rather than merely of the exterior self.

This is no easy task today. We live in a culture that does not support faith — a culture that tends to keep us on the surface of existence as if there were no depths to human life. The temptation we face is letting that culture and the attitudes it engenders seep into our lives of faith and our practice of prayer. It is the danger of living as divided men and women — largely at home with our exterior selves, scarcely ever seeking what is deepest in us, allowing God to maintain His rights over our exterior lives, but without our inner thoughts and desires belonging to Him. Interiorization means throwing open our hearts to the God of Mystery who dwells in unapproachable light and who is yet the very Ground of our being.

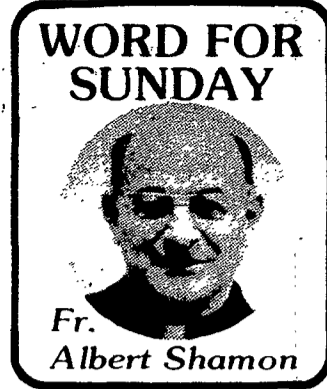
We need to make the prayer of Liturgy a matter of inner experience. We have at long last, a liturgy of participation. We are involved in it. But the question we have to face is whether that involvement is largely external or is it really the involvement of our deepest selves? Liturgy is not just external rites, no matter how well or beautifully executed. Liturgy is the ritualization of my conversion to the Lord. That conversion-experience, which begins in Baptism and runs through the whole of my Christian life, is nothing other than the awakening of my inner self to the reality of Mystery — so that I can grasp, or rather be grasped, by Him in whom I live and move and have my being.

Liturgy, no matter how well carried out, is in the last resort illusory and phoney unless it is a matter of inner experience, an expression and ritualization of the way I have interiorized my life.

BRAILLE

The Rochester Volunteer Brailleists are looking for more people to learn the technique of transcribing reading material for the blind. Potential volunteers can call 225-7786 or 586-9484 for information on classes that start in September.

In a letter to the diocesan Commission on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, the volunteer group said that new members are found chiefly through the churches. With approximately 240 technicians working in five groups, Monroe County has the largest concentration of brailleists in the nation, the letter said.



Sunday's Readings: (R3) Lk. 12:32-48. (R1) Wis. 18:6-9. (R2) Hebr. 11:1-2, 8-19.

The two parables in Sunday's gospel were meant to illustrate the Christian virtue of vigilance: "Be on guard," "Be watchful, and ready." Too many people are asleep; letting life slip by without realizing the value of each daily event.

One reason for this neglect of time is fear. So many today live in fear; as a result, they do not really live. "We're insurance poor," is a twentieth-century expression. That we are indicates that we live in fear. Because we fear not having enough in old age, we take out insurance. Because we fear getting sick, we take out insurance. Because we fear having an accident, we take out insurance, and so on and on. Do not misunderstand me, insurance is all right. **But are we not trying to be too sure?** "Insure and be sure," goes the advertising slogan. But can we? What room is left for faith?

Faith is insurance; it is surety, all right, but based on invisible, not visible support — on trust in Jesus. Out of concern, compassion, care, He said, "Do not live in fear." And He implied why we should not, when he addressed us as

"little flock" — a term of endearment and tender love.

The book of Wisdom was written for Jews who had probably fled to Egypt to escape the terrible persecution of Antiochus (c. 165 B.C.). The author told them why they should not live in fear. "Did not He chastise the Egyptians long ago and bless us? Is that not what our Passover celebration proclaims?"

The book of Hebrews was addressed to Jews who were Christians, but who were thrown out of the Synagogue. He urged them not to worry, but to have faith, like Abraham who himself was a displaced person. "Do not live in fear," he also said. "Yet live!"

Another reason for our lack of vigilance is the tendency to dichotomize life; to separate religion from life, to limit the sacred to the sanctuary, as though life and living itself were not sacred. One day when St. Ignatius was playing billiards with two companions, they got on the subject of what they would do if the world were to end within an hour. "I'd spend the time in church," said one. "I'd go immediately to confession," said the other. Then they turned to St. Ignatius and asked, "What would you do?" He answered after a moment's thought, "I'd go on playing billiards."

Lastly, we fail to be vigilant, because we let the present slip away by focussing too much on the future. True, Christ is coming. But He comes every day in every happening of the day, if we are not asleep.

Once there was a

fisherman — unhappy because he was poor and poor because he was unhappy. One evening he tied his boat to its moorings as usual and set off across the sands to his cottage. On the way his foot struck a small leather pouch. Absentmindedly, he picked it up. "Someday I'll be rich and have men work for me." Then he took one of the stones from the pouch and sent it skimming over the waters. He mused again, "I'll have a big house and servants." Then he turned to the sea again and sent another stone over the waters. He continued along the shore, dreaming and every now and then throwing a stone and watching it sink beneath the waves.

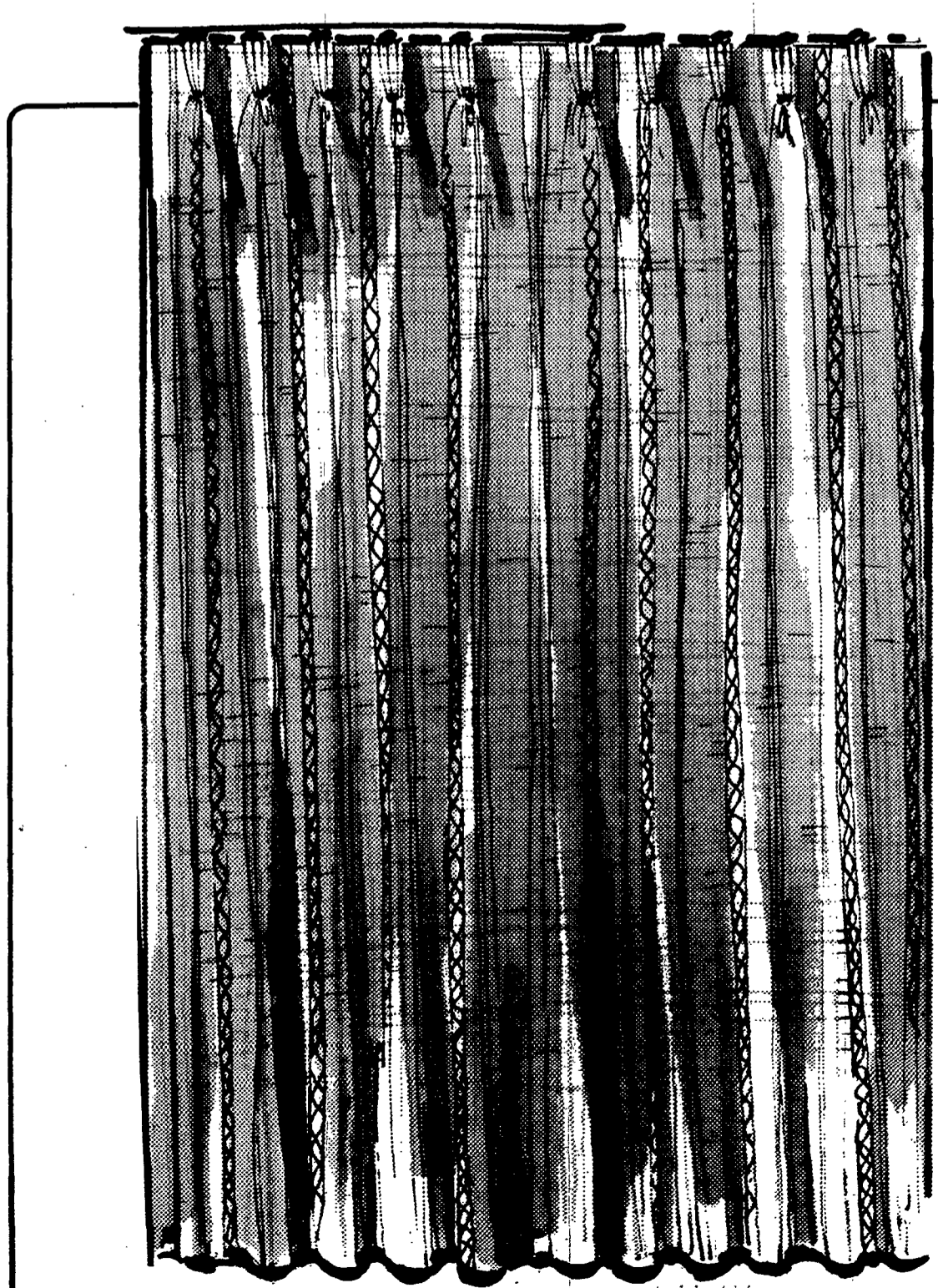
As he neared his cottage and raised his arm to throw away the last stone, the setting sun hit it and the brilliant flash grabbed the fisherman's attention. He examined the stone. It was a precious jewel!

PILGRIMAGE PLANNED

Corning—Thirty-seven St. Vincent DePaul parishioners are going to make a pilgrimage to the St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Shrine in Emmitsburg, Maryland and to the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception Aug. 16 through 19.

Father Joseph F. Hogan, pastor of St. Vincent's, will be the tour's spiritual director, assisted by Father John A. Murphy, pastor of St. Lawrence Parish, Rochester.

The group will leave Corning Aug. 16, visit the Seton Shrine Aug. 17, the National Shrine Aug. 18, and return the following day.



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