

## CHAPTER 5

### *Providence and Prayer*

#### **To pray is to live in league with God**

It is never easy to find words to speak of God and of our relationship to God. Most of us are aware, albeit often vaguely, of the existence of a supreme being, a primary cause which, or rather who, determines our state of being. It comes to us at “is that all there is” times, when the ordinary is too bland, but we soon return to the comfort of what we can see, feel, touch. When we take time to dwell in awe on how much eludes our grasp, we remain speechless.

Persons who are favoured with the gift of faith, and a gift it is, know that the relationship which God initiates in creating us, calls for a response which we offer when we pray. This response can take many forms: praise, petition, soul baring, or simply the willingness to just be, in quiet contemplation, letting the presence of the other invade our consciousness. Because we are wholistic beings, we can pray only in forms that befit our humanness, such as words, gestures, and centeredness. A response necessarily follows from having listened, and is conditioned by what we have heard, in this case God’s self-revelation. It was Jeremiah who said, “When I discovered the word of God, I devoured it”.

Prayer implies a relationship. Relationship means we know one another’s name. When Moses realized he was being singled out, he simply asked God what his name was, to which God readily answered: My name is LIFE, “I am who am”. Whence comes our use of the name Providence for God? Certainly from the Book of Wisdom but also from many allusions made by the prophets.

The prophet Ezekiel refers to God as shepherd, and in the New Testament Christ ascribes that name to himself. The very ordinariness of the name shepherd(ess) does

for us what it did for the Old Testament people. It separates God from material, carved images such as idols and helps us relate to God as one who provides, protects, guides, and hears our prayer.

In the metaphor of the shepherd there are two meanings: one is earthy, and refers simply to an occupation which still prevails in countries like Israel. The spiritual meaning is one of concern and becomes a fitting expression of the Providence of God. When raised to the level of a metaphor in this way it becomes a two-edged sword, uniting the material with the non-material. It has carried into our current vocabulary. We use it to speak of the pastor, pastoral care, words which evoke a nurturing quality in the person with whom one feels secure. "Shepherd" becomes spiritualized, while remaining rooted in our daily experience.

Jesus in his parables always drew from what was familiar, for it is here that we find the seeds for understanding a spiritual message. When the disciples wanted to learn how to pray, the Master chose the family term "father". He refers to the family again when he explains that prayer is a turning to God, to ask for help: "If you, then, who are evil, know how to give gifts to your children, how much more will your father in heaven give good things to those who ask?". Prayer is an asking. Why should we have to ask? Because one of the many gifts of Providence is our freedom to choose, otherwise we would be coerced, wouldn't we? And we only ask of those who can provide, hence, moved by the Spirit, we pray to a Provident God. In the liturgy for the feast of Saint Martin de Porres on November 3, we speak from the bosom of the universe as we ask in prayer: "Father, guide us, as you guide your creation according to your law of love".

We pray because so much is unknown to us. Even the present moment is full of mystery. We believe that even our doubts, the dark side of existence, are part of the divine plan, as is faith.

We pray because we have hope. Pope John XXIII's firm trust in Providence was the basis for his strong dislike for the prophets of doom, whom he sees as not

acknowledging who they are in relation to God. Hope is related to a sense of quickening in the soul; it is a response in eager expectation to the challenge of life as a new thing is revealed, when the gestation of God's Providence is brought to the light of day in a fresh creation, soft and beautiful, invigorating and restoring.

We pray together because we are all recipients of God's loving care. We believe that Providence does not discriminate as to who is deserving and who is not. The beauties of nature are for all God's children to enjoy and it is fitting that we come together to praise and thank Providence.

Over and above material goods we share the grace of faith and we come together as church, in liturgical gatherings. We pray the psalms that Jesus prayed, and celebrate faith-filled feasts and sermons. Liturgical prayer, with the Eucharist as its center, expands our horizons beyond our immediate private concerns. Our common prayer gives a voice to the voiceless, to those who do not know how to pray, to those whose hearts are hardened against prayer. By the cycle of liturgical readings, recounting all mysteries in relation to one another, we as church are enabled to see over and over again the wonder of divine Providence. We celebrate that wonder in the sacramental presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.

When we speak to the Lord on behalf of others, we share in their burden and help create a society of communion. No political system has ever provided this; it begins within each person to build that society, that mystical body. Martin Israel likens the absence of community to an experience of hell: "an atmosphere of isolation of the individual from all contact with living forms as well as from a knowledge of God's all-encompassing Providence".

Whether we pray alone or with others, it is the Spirit of God that activates our motivations and moves us Godward, so that we are never "out of touch" with our Provident God. In order to cultivate this intimacy, we need interiority, we need contemplation. Such a practice helps us live in a climate of trust, as pure as that of a

child in its mother's arms, says St. Vincent de Paul. "If one is constantly aware of God's Providence", says Martin Israel, "so that one is dedicating all of one's thoughts, words, and actions to Him, one is in effect contemplating Him".

Prayer is a human/divine encounter which often relies on words. When Jesus refers to himself as the Word, he links the human and the divine. Using words to speak to God in prayer can be like trying to paint a bird in flight. God is too marvelous a being to be captured and pinned down. No word, not even *Providence*, can contain the reality we worship. Our encounter with God in prayer, therefore, takes place in a symbolic space, a space that is neither totally human nor totally divine. It is a faith-filled awareness that becomes a dialogue. One can think of an encounter between two human beings: without either denying the self, a meeting occurs when each goes beyond the self to take note of the other. The word is an instrument of communication and can be called the formator of community, among us and between us and God.

When heroic faith is in doubt as to whether we are indeed doing God's will, common sense will often prevail. This human reaction also comes under God's Providence, another one of those many ways by which we are led by reason, not against reason, to supernatural faith. And yet God's Providence cannot be assessed simply through human reason. In fact, reason can argue forcefully against reason at times and even make it look idiotic. Just as a child needs the wisdom of parents, we need the loving wisdom of a Provident God to guide us on our way.

No doubt many of us have often wished that God's will might be more evident and explicit; God does not put anything in writing! But when we pray with the sincere desire to fulfill God's will, is it not a guarantee that God is pleased with us?