

+ Liturgy and Continual Prayer

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The blessed Epiphanius, Bishop of Cyprus, was told this by the abbot of a monastery which he had in Palestine. “By your prayers we do not neglect our appointed round of psalmody, but we are very careful to recite Terce, Sext, and None.” Then Epiphanius corrected them with the following comment, “It is clear that you do not trouble about the other hours of the day, if you cease from prayer. The true monk should have prayer and psalmody continually in his heart.”¹

This teaching of Saint Epiphanius, like so many sayings from the Desert Fathers, takes us right to the heart of a theme that is as old as Christianity, that is to say to the precept of the Lord found in the Gospel according to Saint Luke: “And he told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart...”² To this precept Saint Paul offers his apostolic echo, saying “Pray without ceasing”³; Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert, with all perseverance...⁴

The words of Saint Epiphanius also bear witness to the fact that, from early on in Church history, there has been a concerted effort to translate the precept of continual prayer into reality within the context of liturgical celebrations. Two rather remarkable examples of this effort are taken, not from the primitive Church, but from early monasticism: that of the Acemetes in the East and of the Abbey of Agaunum in the West.

Following in the footsteps of a certain Saint Alexander, who began his monastic life in Syria--tending with all his somewhat turbulent soul to live according to the letter of Scripture--the Acemetes, or “non-sleeping” (≥ ≥ ≥ ≥ ≥) monks, having founded a monastery on the Asian side of the Bosphorus around 430, performed their liturgical prayer, their “perpetual doxology,” as they called it, in successive choirs (by language group it seems) so as to be able to fulfill the precept of praying without ceasing. This new monastic practice was transported around 460 to Constantinople, where a similar practice was instituted under a certain Studios.

The practice of literally “unceasing prayer” came to the West about a century later (522 or 533), probably from that same *Studion* in Constantinople (the monastery of Studios). At the abbey of Saint Maurice of Agaunum the *laus perennis* was performed by

¹*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, The Alphabetical Collection*, Epsilon, Epiphanius 3 (Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, 1975) p. 57.

²Lk 18 :1 (Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition, 1965, 1966).

³1 Thess 5 :17.

⁴Eph 6 :1

multiple squads of monks, *chorae* or *turmae*, without intermission, as a sermon given by Saint Avitus, bishop of Vienne attests.⁵ Other monasteries in Gaul followed suit.

Much later, but along the line of the same spiritual intention of continual prayer, the abbey of Cluny offered something of a *laus perennis* in its multiplication of the psalmody. In the time of Saint Hugh (1049-1109), to the regular Benedictine liturgical *cursus* were added offices of the Dead and of All Saints, further augmented by four psalms, the *familiares*, after each canonical hour. According to the historian Noreen Hunt,

The fifteen gradual psalms, the seven penitential psalms, the first or last thirty psalms could also be recited for a particular intention or as a penitential exercise. At Cluny in Lent two [additional] psalms were said prostrate after each canonical hour. Another typical devotion of the Aniane tradition, of which all the above-named accretions were familiar features, was the *trina oratio*, said privately on entering the church for the night office and in some places on other occasions as well...Ulrich tells us that before the night office he was accustomed to say the fifteen gradual psalms in groups of five, each group followed by versicle and collect...At other times he said the seven penitential psalms.⁶

The monks of the great Burgundian abbey thus spent a great deal of each day performing their own version of continual prayer.

Liturgical prayer, it is true, is not the only means by which Christians in different places and times have sought to pray without ceasing. The monological prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” much practiced in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, is a striking example.⁷ We find the classic text on this subject in *The Pilgrim’s Tale*, written by the Russian, Mikhail Kozlov, in the late nineteenth century, where the question of continual prayer figures very prominently. The Pilgrim, after having sought in vain the answer to his question about continual prayer elsewhere, finally encounters a monk “of the great habit,” who reveals the nature of this prayer:

The unceasing interior Jesus prayer in an uninterrupted, never dying invocation of the divine name Jesus Christ with the mind and heart, all the while imagining his ongoing presence and asking for his pardon, during all occupations, in every place, at all times, even in sleep...The prayer is expressed in the following words: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.*

This same monk then gives the Pilgrim a copy of the *Philokalia*, an eighteenth century compilation of quotations from earlier texts of the Patristic and Byzantine spiritual

⁵Cf *Dictionnaire d’Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie* (Paris : Letouzey et Ané, 1907), tome 1, 1ère partie, col. 861-862.

⁶Noreen Hunt, *Cluny under Saint Hugh* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p.100.

⁷See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2667.

tradition, from which the latter nourishes his soul henceforth, as he learns to spend each day in this uninterrupted prayer.

Without attempting to speak here of more recent forms, such as “centering prayer,” that would take us too far from the topic of *liturgy and continual prayer*, it will suffice to mention such well-known Catholic devotional prayers as Eucharistic adoration, including in the United States the more and more widespread practice of perpetual adoration,⁸ the Rosary, Stations of the Cross, Litanies, and so many pious exercises recommended by spiritual giants like Saint Francis de Sales,⁹ Saint Alphonsus of Ligouri, and Saint Louis de Montfort¹⁰, practices that have become a mainstay of Catholic piety over recent centuries. These forms of prayer help in maintaining a constant prayer life those in particular who do not celebrate the Divine office. Finally, in order to illustrate this sort of continual prayer that is not liturgical, another apothegm from the Alphabetical Series of the Sayings of the Desert Fathers might be in order.

Some of the monks who are called Euchites went to Enaton to see Abba Lucius. The old man asked them, “What is your manual work?” They said, “We do not touch manual work but as the Apostle says, we pray without ceasing.” The old man asked them if they did not eat and they replied they did. So he said to them, “When you are eating, who prays for you then?” Again he asked them if they did not sleep and they replied they did. And he said to them, “When you are asleep, who prays for you then?” They could not find any answer to give him. He said to them, “Forgive me, but you do not act as you speak. I will show you how, while doing my manual work, I pray without interruption. I sit down with God, soaking my reeds and plaiting my ropes, and I say, ‘God have mercy on me; according to your great goodness and according to the multitude of your mercies, save me from my sins.’” So he asked them if this were not a prayer and they replied it was. Then he said to them, “So when I have spent the whole day working and praying, making thirteen pieces of money more or less, I put two pieces of money outside the door and I pay for my food with the rest of the money. He who takes the two pieces of money prays for me when I am eating and when I am sleeping; so, by the grace of God, I fulfill the precept to pray without ceasing.”¹¹

⁸In the opening prayer of the Perpetual chapel in St. Peter’s Basilica, Pope Saint John Paul II prayed for a perpetual adoration chapel in every parish in the world. Pope Benedict XVI instituted perpetual adoration in each of the five sectors of the diocese of Rome (March 2, 2006).

⁹For example in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*.

¹⁰For example, *True Devotion to Mary*.

¹¹*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, The Alphabetical Collection*, Lamba, Lucius (Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, 1975) pp. 120-121.

Thus, as we have briefly shown, continual prayer takes multiple forms that are not specifically liturgical. However, it must be remembered that the sacred liturgy, being the official prayer of the Church, remains the essential reference for the Church's prayer life.

Popular devotions of the Christian people, explains the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council, provided they conform to the laws and norms of the Church, are to be highly recommended...But such devotions should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some way derived from it, and lead the people to it, since in fact the liturgy by its very nature is far superior to any of them.¹²

"The Church," continues the same document, "by celebrating the Eucharist and by other means,... is ceaselessly engaged in praising the Lord. The divine office, in particular, "in keeping with ancient Christian tradition, is so devised that the whole course of the day and night is made holy by the praise of God." The voice of the Church is then the voice of the "Bride herself addressed to her Bridegroom...the very prayer which Christ himself together with his Body addresses to the Father."¹³ In a real sense therefore the liturgy, official prayer of the Church, *is* continual prayer, and continual prayer at its best.

It is obvious nonetheless that continual prayer in a material sense, whether that of the liturgy or that of such practices as the "Jesus Prayer," cannot literally be fulfilled on a stable basis. And this leads to a final and, perhaps, deeper insight into the whole question.

There is, remarks Abbot Paul Delatte, a form of *Laus perennis* which does not require an army of monks, which is open to each individual to realize; it is secret prayer, attention to God and the things of God, the attitude of submission and love, a certain constant contact with Beauty ever present.¹⁴

Mother Abbess Cecile Bruyère, first abbess of Sainte Cécile of Solesmes, expressing the same thought, but couching it in the language of the contemplative nun, writes:

This atmosphere of prayer should penetrate our whole life, from the moment we wake until the moment we fall asleep; and even when we sleep, it is in the arms of God; it is a continuous prayer, and even when it seems that everything sleeps, this prayer penetrates our whole being, just as incense penetrates the objects that receive it.... That is a good image of the perfume of prayer which a nun should exude. One doesn't achieve that ceaseless prayer of one's whole being by means of the effort of one's brain, but by the harmony of one's will with that of God, by the unconditional handing over of one's life to him...That is the true atmosphere

¹²Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 13.

¹³*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 83-84.

¹⁴Commentary on the Rule (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1921), p. 173

of prayer; it is not a specific act; it is a state one calls forth in oneself by seeking it constantly, by ceaselessly returning to it.¹⁵

But all of this was just an introduction, the opening of a door or two. It will be the ‘work’ of this workshop now to explore the many mansions of this spiritual citadel of *liturgy and continual prayer*, the city of adoration “in Spirit and in Truth.

¹⁵The Spirit of Solesmes (Petersham: St. Bede’s Publications, 1997), p. 151-152. See also St. Augustine, *Enarrationes*, Commentary on Psalm 102, n. 2.