

Concerning the Prayer of Faith (I)

by Eduardo Benlloch, SM

We know the spirit of faith is found in the very roots of Marianist spirituality. But it is impossible to live through the spirit of faith without nourishing it with the prayer of faith. In short, when we speak about the prayer of faith we are simply speaking about the Marianist style of prayer. Father Chaminade left us many writings about prayer and faith in letters, papers, notes, and even in some more elaborate texts. We need only to go through the book *Writings on Mental Prayer* or *Writings on Faith* to become convinced.

In order to write about prayer of faith, I could have chosen any of these texts. This might have resulted in a good article or series of articles. However, in considering this matter for some articles, I decided to use a different method. First, I will try to let myself be deeply inspired by Father Chaminade and his teachings, and then I will endeavor to combine this with my pastoral experiences and seminars presented to religious men and women and to lay Marianists and Affiliates. Once I have carried out this kind of comparative method, I will try to offer some written spiritual reflections.

Importance of the Presence of God in Prayer and Faith

There is a whole vocabulary of expressions to give us an idea for the meaning of this attitude: “living in the presence of God,” “being with God,” “entering into the presence of God,” “practicing the presence of God.” Let us delve into a difficult analysis of the levels one can reach to be in the presence of God.

- To go from forgetfulness or unconsciousness to the realization that God is there, with me. As an example, let us suppose that I, preoccupied by my own affairs, get on a city bus, and I do not realize that my father is in one of the seats there. As I take a look at the other riders, I see him. I realize he is there. I smile at him and give him a little wave. Then I continue thinking about my affairs under my father’s gaze. It is the same with God: I go into a church, and I see the tabernacle and the candle lit beside it. I realize that God is there, and I do a sign of reverence by making the sign of the cross and even saying some vocal prayers. But soon my concerns rise up again within me. Perhaps I have a slight hint about presenting them to God or seeking God’s light, but that is all. There is simply no profound transformation within me.

- But something more may happen. Let us recall the example of the bus. My father's presence begins to affect me more intensely. I am overjoyed to have run into my father. I approach his seat, and I enjoy a conversation with him. My concerns have been left behind and may even be forgotten, because I am enjoying what my father tells me. It is the same with God in the church: something moves me . . . how good it is to be here, with God!
- There is great silence in the church I have entered: there is a palpable peace. Then I completely abandon myself, and I let God invade me. He takes possession of me, and I exclude every other reasoning or deliberation that could separate me from God. God alone is sufficient!
- If this happens to me when I try to pray—I remain simply and lovingly with God during all that time—then Father Chaminade would tell me I have made an excellent prayer: I have encountered God. I have not gone to look for ideas or deliberations about God, to end up finding my own self. On the contrary, I have been with God and remained with him.

Moreover, we could ask ourselves the following question. “Why do we experience such little progress in our prayer, even after many years of practicing half an hour of meditation every morning and evening?” Father Chaminade's reply would be that at the beginning of your prayer you did not really place yourself in the presence of God. And for this reason, you do not live with a spirit of faith either, nor are you motivated by faith in your thoughts, feelings, actions, and reactions. Your life has no depth. But if you would spend that half hour of prayer trying only to let yourself be moved by God who is with you, how different your life would be!

Going Out of Ourselves Toward God and Returning Purified to Our Inner Self

Many times we are so focused on ourselves that faith in God becomes practically impossible. As soon as I try to keep silent within, my problems, weaknesses, limitations, and anxieties rise up imperiously. It is essential to go out of ourselves and to move toward God. First of all, we go toward a God contemplated in the total panoramic and harmonious view of our creed. For this reason Father Chaminade had people pray the whole creed in a slow and deliberate manner. In a way, we have left a terrible and imprisoning subjectivity to arrive at a certain objectivity regarding the God of mysteries. Afterward, we can dwell in a loving and penetrating observation of each of the mysteries

of this God, or of each article of faith, as Father Chaminade said. According to our Founder, each of these mysteries has a special purifying effect. That is, we are purified by this consideration of God. As we leave behind the dark and ugly self that imprisoned us, we are now filled with the light of God, and we are willing to return to our inner selves in order to discover how we are a reflection of that creating and good God. We can build our new life from God. How many times have we missed improving our prayer because we did not go out of ourselves? We did not purify ourselves, and we were unable to discover the deep and serene waters of our goodness, which reveal the spring of God's goodness!

Going Out of Ourselves in Search of God's Interests

True love always seeks the interests of the beloved and how to please him or her. The opposite is not love but possessive self-centeredness. Prayer consists in loving God, in going out of ourselves and passionately searching for God's interests. It is assimilating God's loving plan of creation, salvation, and sanctification of humankind. That is, to make the credo parade before our heart, with enough pauses to allow us to tune into God's saving will through these mysteries of our faith. And we can savor these mysteries in the style of Hebrew poetry, which always surrounds the object of contemplation with parallel approximations and with analogies, bringing us closer every time to the heart of the mystery.

If we truly love God, we will love all those whom God loves; that is, all his children, our brothers and sisters. Thus, we are able to pray with our life. Our life also must be a loving collaboration with this God who builds, saves, and sanctifies.

The Magnificat as a Prayer of Faith

A disposition that should characterize Marianist prayer is praying with Mary. Father Chaminade insisted on this with words always full of emotion and tenderness. The Magnificat is Mary's prayer that the Bible offers to us. But deep down, the Magnificat is an excellent example of a prayer of faith. Mary's spirit rises joyfully toward God, whom she contemplates in the greatness of God's mystery: admiring and celebrating the holiness of God's name, saving power, and mercy that is extended to the faithful from generation to generation. Mary has gone out of herself to find God. From this contemplation of God, she returns to her humble inner self and recognizes that God has

done great things for her, and she feels happy. She is in the presence of God who has taken possession of her.

This union with God brings Mary into communion with God's plan; she welcomes with joy God's action that scatters the proud and lifts up the lowly; she is in solidarity with the needy and the hungry whom her God loves and fills with good things. She joyfully gives herself, unconditionally and unreservedly, to the Lord's plan of salvation, because she passionately seeks God's interests, those promises of God to Abraham and to his descendants.

Thus, we can understand the words of Father Chaminade: "Let us then unite ourselves to Mary in mental prayer and beg her to make her Son known to us, she who knew him and observed him so well . . . and gathered up and preserved . . . in her heart all the words which came forth from his mouth" (*Writings on Mental Prayer*, no. 57).

[Translation provided by the International Center for Marianist Formation (ICFM). All rights reserved. Original article appeared in *Vida Marianista*, no. 51, Feb. 2007, pp. 2-3.]