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Communion with God as the Central Idea of Prayer

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Communion with God as the Central Idea of Prayer

This paper attempts to explain ways in which communion with God is the central idea of prayer. It then seeks to show how this relates to a compassionate life.

How Communion with God is the Central Idea of Prayer

Means by which communion with God is the pivotal concept of prayer can be argued as follows.

First of all, the ground of *prayer is basically a response to God's presence within the heart of one's being*.¹ God's presence is the divine indwelling.² Stated another way, the holy Trinity is dwelling within³ – and grace is eternal life already begun.⁴ This infused supernatural life,⁵ clearly implying communion with God, is at the heart of Christian prayer. Casey affirms this: “God is within us as the object and support and the stimulus of prayer”.⁶ From this perspective, then, prayer is something that is enacted within.⁷ Ware expresses it this way: “To pray is to descend with the mind into the heart, and there to stand before the face of the Lord, ever-present, all-seeing, within you”.⁸

¹ Michael Casey, “The Pilgrim’s Lament”, *Tjurunga* 13 (1977): 338.

² Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 338.

³ Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, “The Life of Grace and the Importance of the First Conversion”, in *The Three Ways of the Spiritual Life* (London: Burns & Oates, 1938; reprint, Tan Reprint, 2002), 15 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

⁴ Garrigou-Lagrange, “The Life of Grace”, 13. Note: Garrigou-Lagrange shows that the statement, “He that believes in me has eternal life” appears six times in the Bible: Jn 3:36; 5:24, 39; 6:40, 47, 55 (page 13).

⁵ Garrigou-Lagrange, “The Life of Grace”, 6.

⁶ Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 338.

⁷ Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 338.

⁸ Timothy Ware, ed., *The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology* (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), 110; quoted in Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 59.

Furthermore, *it is through the sacrament of baptism and incorporation into Christ that one is admitted into God's own family.*⁹ Second Peter adds that a person becomes a participant of the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4)¹⁰ – in other words, God gives them a share in his own intimate divine life.¹¹ Consequently, one receives the ability and right to address God – that is, to commune with God which is the basis of prayer. Participation in the divine nature¹² at the heart level transforms our whole being into Christ.¹³ Nouwen partly describes the process as follows:

In our heart we come to see ourselves as sinners embraced by the mercy of God. It is this vision that makes us cry out, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner”. The prayer of the heart challenges us to hide absolutely nothing from God and to surrender ourselves unconditionally to his mercy . . . It unmask the many illusions about ourselves and about God and leads us into the true relationship of the sinner to the merciful God”.¹⁴

Also critical to communion with God (which is central to prayer) is *a willingness to positively endorse the fact of the divine indwelling, or sanctifying grace, on the basis of personal experience.*¹⁵ By looking into one's own heart, assurance can be received through the words of the apostle Paul who declares: “Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you” (2 Cor 13:5).¹⁶ That is, to accept that prayer includes “standing in the presence of God with the mind in the heart”, as Nouwen asserts, and “there heart speaks to heart, because there we stand before the face of the Lord, all-seeing, within us”.¹⁷ The reality of God's presence in the inner being – which makes communion with God possible – is not always

⁹ Casey, “Pilgrim's Lament”, 338.

¹⁰ *Holy Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 321.

¹¹ Garrigou-Lagrange, “The Life of Grace”, 10.

¹² Garrigou-Lagrange, “The Life of Grace”, 11.

¹³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 61.

¹⁴ Nouwen, *Way of the Heart*, 61.

¹⁵ Casey, “Pilgrim's Lament”, 338.

¹⁶ *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985), 2253.

¹⁷ Nouwen, *Way of the Heart*, 59-60.

perceived because one tends to be fixed on the level of consciousness.¹⁸ However, the divine presence is not found in consciousness.¹⁹ Casey affirms that “God dwells in man *at the level of the heart* [emphasis mine], which is created in his image and renewed in Baptism according to the pattern of Christ”.²⁰ By contrast, typical conscious thoughts at the *mind* level are analytical and cognitive – they are humanly reasoned out.²¹

A fourth way in which communion with God is central to prayer is that *in order to become aware of the presence of God, one needs to create within oneself “an emptiness into which the divine fullness may seep”*.²² Casey elaborates further: “The art of prayer is the art of discovering God’s presence in our life . . . Prayer is less doing than letting be”.²³ In other words, prayer is not only asking things of God, but also receiving what he wants to give – not just being heard by God, but hearing God praying to you.²⁴ Many do not know how to penetrate beyond the level of the conscious.²⁵ Needed is for a person to still their own mind and to listen to the flow of God’s inner spontaneous thoughts – realizing, as Virklers write, that “the deepest desire of God’s heart is to have communion with his children”.²⁶

Moreover, *communion with God (the central idea of prayer) necessitates silence*. The psalmist wrote, “Be still, and know that I am God!” (Ps 46:10)²⁷ Casey defines silence as “not anxious introspection nor idle somnolence, but alert, dedicatory, self-giving

¹⁸ Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 338.

¹⁹ Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 338.

²⁰ Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 339.

²¹ Mark Virkler and Patti Virkler, *Dialogue with God: Opening the Door to Two-Way Prayer* (Orlando, Florida: Bridge-Logos, 1986), 31.

²² Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 339.

²³ Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 339.

²⁴ Louis Evely, *Our Prayer* (Oxford: Mowbray, 1975); quoted in Sharon Connors, *Adventures in Prayer: Using the Creative Power of the Universe to Change Your Life* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2004), 221.

²⁵ Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 339. Note: Casey writes, “These people honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me”. Or perhaps it would be better said, “They are far from their hearts”. Prayer is not simply a matter of gimmicks. . . (page 339).

²⁶ Virkler and Virkler, *Dialogue with God*, 15.

²⁷ *New Revised Standard Version*, 696.

stillness and quietness”.²⁸ Such silence in prayer, however, is not doing nothing – rather, there is a minimum of activity which includes maintaining vigilance.²⁹ The purpose of the overall non-activity and passivity is being receptive to the action of grace, and therefore being responsive to the presence of God³⁰ – being prepared to hear God. “The Desert Fathers”, writes Nouwen, “did not think of silence as not speaking, but as listening to God”.³¹

Sixth, *communion with God is the central idea of prayer through faith*. Casey notes that “prayer is the test of our faith in the divine indwelling”.³² He explains that “to remove ourselves from interesting, satisfying and useful activities in order to be with him requires not only discipline and dedication, but also the fundamental conviction that it is a meaningful activity”.³³ Such faith trusts in the irruption of Mystery into one’s life, knowing that such a happening can have unpredictable results.³⁴ Faith, then, involves an encounter with the infinite mysterious reality of God, one and triune – or, as Principe expresses, “[it] is the assent to the very truth of God in a very personal encounter in which it is God as First Truth that ‘speaks’, albeit in darkness, to the mind and in which we assent to the Truth under the sweet or perhaps scary movement of the will itself moved by God”.³⁵

Finally, *communion with God is the central idea of prayer through the role of the Holy Spirit*. Casey writes that “the Spirit aids our weakness, bridging the gap between our hidden desires and our limited powers of manifesting them”.³⁶ Consequently, one must learn to be responsive to the Spirit’s promptings – for example, to accept from the Spirit

²⁸ Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 340.

²⁹ Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 340.

³⁰ Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 340.

³¹ Nouwen, *Way of the Heart*, 53.

³² Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 340.

³³ Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 340.

³⁴ Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 340.

³⁵ Walter Principe, “Aquinas’ Spirituality for Christ’s Faithful Living in the World”, *Spirituality Today* 44 (No. 2, 1992): 128.

³⁶ Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 341.

the cry “Abba! Father!”³⁷ This is conveyed in Galatians 4:6 as “And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”³⁸ In the Sacred Word are many other words which the Spirit has breathed and can give shape to communion with God.³⁹ Additionally, movement of the Spirit within needs to be discerned – for example, it may at times be intuitively sensed as a spontaneous thought, idea, word, feeling, or vision appearing in the mind.⁴⁰

In summary, communion with God – one’s relationship with the indwelling triune God through grace in the seven ways presented – is indeed the underlying reality that is the foundation and central idea of prayer.⁴¹

How Communion with God Relates to a Compassionate Life

When prayer, and in fact one’s whole life as a Christian, is a response to the movement of grace,⁴² then a more compassionate life will follow. This can be asserted from a Trinitarian perspective as follows.

First, as one responds to the God of all grace who calls (1 Pet 5:10),⁴³ a person will in turn tend to *respond to others with the measure of the grace and compassion that they have experienced*. This principle is alluded to in Jesus’ words to Simon the Pharisee: “The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little” (Lk 7:47).⁴⁴

Second, the Gospel of John records Jesus as saying: “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (Jn 14:23).⁴⁵ Casey reminds readers that “it is important that our fundamental

³⁷ Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 341.

³⁸ *New Revised Standard Version*, 254.

³⁹ Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 341.

⁴⁰ Virkler and Virkler, *Dialogue with God*, 31.

⁴¹ Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 341.

⁴² Casey, “Pilgrim’s Lament”, 347.

⁴³ *New Revised Standard Version*, 320.

⁴⁴ *New Revised Standard Version*, 91.

⁴⁵ *New Revised Standard Version*, 148.

disposition during prayer is one of listening for and responding to God's call".⁴⁶ *Since the nature of God the Father is portrayed in Scripture as one who is compassionate, then by implication responding to God's call would also include a compassionate stance toward the world.*⁴⁷ Responding to God, who is described as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6),⁴⁸ would inevitably lead to a more compassionate life.

Third, in Colossians 1:27, the apostle Paul writes to Gentiles mentioning how "God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory".⁴⁹ At times, the Christ within makes his presence felt within – and again one is called to respond. An example can be developed as follows. One of the predominant characteristics of Jesus while on earth was his compassion. In Luke's account of the Crucifixion, he tells of the compassion of Jesus reaching out to those around him – such as his praying for the soldiers who crucify him, commending them to the Father's compassion (Lk 23:34).⁵⁰ Accordingly, *a person responding to Christ within them would likewise lead a life marked by compassionate deeds.*

Finally, Paul wrote in Romans: "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom 8:15-16).⁵¹ Casey notes "that we are established in a state of prayer by the fact of our divine adoption".⁵² As a result, *if a person is sensitive to the attractions of grace – that is, to the*

⁴⁶ Casey, "Pilgrim's Lament", 349.

⁴⁷ Note: The parable of prodigal son exemplifies the Father's compassion (Luke 15:11-32). The father's love, and therefore compassion, included both sons.

⁴⁸ *New Revised Standard Version*, 113.

⁴⁹ *New Revised Standard Version*, 270.

⁵⁰ Michael Ramsey, "The Prayer of Jesus", in *Be Still and Know* (London: Fontana, 1982; reprint, Cowley, 1992), 25 (page citation is to the reprint edition).

⁵¹ *New Revised Standard Version*, 211.

⁵² Casey, "Pilgrim's Lament", 341.

promptings of God's Spirit within – then they would tend toward more compassionate behaviour. This is based on the premise of being able to recognize the fruit of the Spirit in a believer's life: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal 5:22)⁵³ These nine attributes would help constitute the foundation for a compassionate life.

In summary, through communion with God, as Nouwen writes, "we become compassionate people, deeply aware of our solidarity in brokenness with all of humanity and ready to reach out to anyone in need".⁵⁴

Conclusion

This paper has suggested ways in which communion with God is the central idea of prayer, and which in turn lead to the outcome of a more compassionate life. Tables 1 and 2 on the following page encapsulate the line of explanation pursued in the paper.

⁵³ *New Revised Standard Version*, 256.

⁵⁴ Nouwen, *Way of the Heart*, 25.

Table 1. How Communion with God is the Central Idea of Prayer

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- Prayer is essentially a response to God's presence within the heart of one's being.
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- Through the sacrament of baptism and incorporation into Christ, one is admitted into God's own family – and communion with God becomes a reality.
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- Needed is a willingness to endorse the fact of divine indwelling (or sanctifying grace) – on the basis of personal experience.
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- To become aware of the presence of God means creating within oneself an emptiness into which the divine presence may seep.
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- Communion with God, as the central idea of prayer, necessitates silence.
-
- Faith is vital to communion with God and is the basis of prayer.
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- Prayer, aided by the Holy Spirit, is imperative for communion with God.

Table 2. How Communion with God Relates to a Compassionate Life

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- Compassionately responding to others occurs according to the measure of grace and compassion personally experienced in God (cf. Lk 7:47)
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- Since the nature of God the Father includes compassion, responding to God's call implies a compassionate stance.
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- A person responding to Christ within them will lead a life characterized by compassionate deeds.
-
- Remaining sensitive to the attractions of grace – the promptings of God's Spirit within – results in compassionate behaviour.
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