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Prayer in World Religions

A Christian Understanding with Special
Focus on the Question of Interreligious Prayer

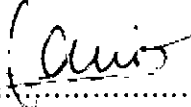


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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflections. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

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This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.


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ABBREVIATIONS

- AG Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, *Ad gentes divinitus* (Dec. 7, 1965)
- CCC *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Oct. 11, 1993)
- DM *Dialogue and Mission*, Document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (May 26, 1978)
- DP *Dialogue and Proclamation*, Document of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (May 9, 1991)
- DS H. Denzinger and A. Schönmetzer, eds., *Enchiridion Symbolorum: Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*
- DetV John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Dominum et Vivificantem* (May 18, 1986)
- EN Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Dec. 8, 1975)
- GS Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes* (Dec. 7, 1965)
- LG Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium* (Nov. 21, 1964)
- NA Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra aetate* (Oct. 28, 1965)
- PCID Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (Secretariat for Non-Christians)
- PISAI *Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica*
- PL *Patrologia Latina*
- Q Qur'an
- RH John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptor Hominis* (Mar. 4, 1979)
- RM John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Missio* (Dec. 7, 1990)

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INTRODUCTION

A STRANGER IS ONLY A FRIEND THAT I DON'T KNOW YET

Jn many languages, the word for stranger is the word for guest, and there are not two different words. A stranger, therefore, is to be treated as a guest is to be treated. And a guest is thus, not simply a person one knows but someone who, though not known, is nevertheless worthy of special treatment.

Gittins, Anthony J., *Gifts and Strangers: Meeting the
Challenge of Inculturation.*

A TOPIC OF CURRENT IMPORTANCE

The present sociological situation – a highly mobile world where people of different cultures and faiths are living in close contact – has brought an increase in dialogue and relations. These can take many forms, one of which is exchange at the level of religious experience.¹ This exchange often includes the desire of praying together, for prayer is one of the deepest expressions of the human heart and believers are never more truly themselves than when they are at prayer. However, fulfilling this desire is not as simple as it looks.

Prayer is intrinsically linked to a belief system and a religious tradition: *lex orandi, lex credenti*. An obvious question thus arises: can people who profess different belief systems pray together? Is interreligious prayer really possible?

Some Christians see this question as having received a final answer from St Paul: "What fellowship is there between light and darkness? What agreement does Christ have with Beliar?" (2 Cor 6:14-15). Such a position could have been somehow justified in the past, when the other religion was, in practice, the religion of a completely different cultural environment. The last century, however, has seen an explosion of knowledge among Christians concerning the other religious traditions of the world. Stereotypes have increasingly been replaced by more accurate knowledge. The immense spiritual riches of the religious traditions of humankind do not allow us to continue believing – at least not without damaging our common sense – that non-Christian religious practices are all aberrations due to superstition and unbelief. The growing contact among believers of different faiths makes the question of common prayer pertinent in the extreme.

Christian engagement in interreligious prayer is still very sporadic although it is becoming increasingly common. The occasions for such prayers may be informal such as family events or common misfortunes, or they may be national days or events at an international level. From the

¹ On the different forms of dialogue – dialogue of life, dialogue of a common commitment to the works of justice and human liberation, dialogue of theological exchange, and dialogue of religious experiences – see *DIALOGUE AND MISSION*, nos. 29-35. The dialogue of religious experience takes place "at a deeper level," where "persons rooted in their own religious traditions can share their experiences of prayer, contemplation, faith, and duty, as well as their expressions and ways of searching for the Absolute" (DM 35).

Catholic perspective, the Day of Prayer for Peace, held in Assisi in 1986 at the invitation of Pope John Paul II, has had a strong impact. It conferred legitimacy to Catholic initiatives towards interreligious dialogue and in particular the search for sensitive and appropriate ways of interreligious prayer.

Several questions are raised regarding interreligious prayer: is it only as a sympathetic observer, or can there be a fuller Christian participation in such prayer? Does prayer mean the same in all religions, so much so that interreligious prayer can be seen as prayer to the same God? Is interreligious prayer just an expression of social harmony? Does interreligious prayer suppose a compromise in one's own beliefs? These are some of the questions addressed in this paper.

SCOPE AND SEQUENCE OF THIS WORK

Chapter one bears the general title, Christian understanding of Prayer. We look first at prayer as the central act of the religious attitude and try to define its limits from the perspective of the phenomenology of religion. This prepares us for examining what distinguishes Christian prayer from the prayer of other religious traditions, the so called *proprium Christianum*. After looking briefly at the biblical teaching and practice on prayer, we focus our attention on the prayer of Jesus himself and his teaching about prayer. Next we explore St Paul's view about the indissoluble link between prayer and the Holy Spirit. We finish the chapter by reviewing what recent Church documents have said about the nature of Christian prayer.

Chapter two extends the discourse to religious traditions in general. It presents a brief survey of the phenomenon of prayer in Islam and African Traditional Religion. The choice of these traditions is determined by the African context from which this reflection is written. It is not possible to do justice to any religion in a few lines. A comprehensive treatment would require a separate book for each religion. We shall however make the attempt, while recognising that many things must remain unsaid.

On the basis of these two concrete examples of prayer traditions outside Christianity, chapter three attempts a theological understating of prayer in world religions. We turn first to

Scripture and ask the question whether the Bible contains significant indications of a prayer relationship between God and non-Israelites. We then look at the liturgical tradition of the Latin Church and study an interesting text from the Roman canon which can help us in view of an assessment of the prayers and rites of the various religious traditions. It follows a concise presentation of Pope John Paul II's contribution to a theology of religions, both in his doctrinal teaching as well as through his apostolic actions. In particular we review his initiative of inviting leaders from the world religions to Assisi in 1986 to take part in a Day of Prayer for Peace.

Finally, chapter four considers the question of interreligious prayer: Can we pray together? We examine the occasions and the different approaches that common prayer takes; the fundamental question of the motivation in interreligious prayer, and the necessary limitations of such a prayer.

We conclude our reflection by examining the place and role of common prayer in the overall practice of interreligious dialogue.



CHAPTER I

CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF PRAYER

Oh man, recognise the dignity of your prayer! When you confess that you have become partaker of the divine nature, then you also confess that your prayer is not just the prayer of man, man who is in you, but rather the prayer of the Spirit of God in you. You yourself still don't notice what enormous things are taking place in the abysses of your heart, when you begin to say, 'our Father'.

Karl Rahner, *The Need and the Blessing of Prayer*.

1. PRAYER, CENTRAL ACT OF THE RELIGIOUS ATTITUDE

The religious attitude, which incorporates the totality of the person into a relationship with the Mystery, does not exist in abstract. It needs to be realised in a series of concrete acts. And so from the religious attitude there springs up a rational expression, a cultic expression, an ethic expression, etc. An act that proceeds directly and immediately from that religious attitude is prayer. As human beings naturally communicate by speech with other human beings, so they instinctively address the supernatural powers of their belief through the same medium. In fact, Rahner says, "prayer is *the* great religious act."¹ Prayer realises the essence of the religious act: "man's entry into the transcendence of his own being, in which he allows himself to become receptive, humble and reverent."²

Prayer is not just one expression of the religious attitude among many, but its primary and most immediate expression. Wherever prayer has fallen silent religion has also disappeared.³ Prayer is closest to the root from which all religious manifestations are born. Thus, in order to know the religious attitude of a community it suffices to pay attention to their prayers:

It already says very much about how you conceive of God if you think that prayer to him is significantly important. For you are saying that God in some sense hears us, is personally concerned about us, answers us, is at work in the world in response to us.⁴

Prayer is the first act in which the religious attitude is realised: *oratio est proprie religionis actus*.⁵ Not surprisingly prayer has been referred to as the 'heartbeat,' the 'blood,' the 'breathing,' and the 'language' of religious life.

¹ Karl RAHNER, "Prayer" in *Encyclopaedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. by Karl Rahner (Tumbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1975), 1272.

² RAHNER, "Prayer" in *Encyclopaedia of Theology*, 1275.

³ "Prayer," writes Cullmann from a specifically Christian viewpoint, "is that practice without which there is no religion, without which, as Guardini says, in the long run one cannot be a Christian any more than one can live without breathing, and which according to Luther is the very calling of the Christian, just as making shoes that of the cobbler." Oscar CULLMANN, *Prayer in the New Testament*, (London: SCM Press, 1995), 8.

⁴ John H. WRIGHT, *A Theology of Christian Prayer*, (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1979), xiii.

⁵ *Summa Theologiae* II, II, 83, 30.

2. BETWEEN MAGIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL MEDITATION

The human reaction in front of the appearance of the Supernatural Reality takes two forms essentially different: the attempt at dominating that Reality and its unconditional acceptance.⁶ The first reaction is expressed in magical actions and formulas; the second is expressed in the religious attitude and its immediate manifestation, i.e., prayer. The difference between these two attitudes is evident and yet the 'materials' used by both attitudes, magical and religious, to express themselves are sometimes identical.⁷ This reality has led some to count as magical what in reality are formulas of authentic prayer, especially in the case of petitionary prayer.

Petitionary prayer, however, contains a series of indications – formulas of respectful greeting and expressions of dependence and trust – which reveal an attitude of true recognition of a superior power. Even the most elementary petition can be said to be authentic prayer when it proceeds from an attitude of total trust in a Being that is recognised as utterly superior. The more this prayer is purified the more it loses its ingenuity and the more it expresses trust in purer forms such as thanksgiving and praise. Occasional prayer eventually gives way to a constant awareness of the presence of the Mystery and any necessary connection with formulas, places and times disappears.

The purification of prayer can also take place along a route that insists on the transcendence of the Mystery. This path leads to a second expression of authentic prayer: mystic prayer. However, if petitionary prayer borders on magic, mystic prayer shares a border with philosophical meditation on the Absolute, in which the desire to preserve the transcendence of God may lead to a lack of genuine relationship. This is the clearest perversion of mysticism, i.e., the purely intellectual attitude of affirming the Transcendent and, in order to preserve it in its purity, denying any possibility of relationship with it.

⁶ Cf. Juan de Dios MARTIN VELASCO, Introducción a la Fenomenología de la Religión (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1978), 174-184.

⁷ Prayer itself has many common features with acts proceeding from a clearly magical attitude. Prayer is often accompanied by symbolic actions which are based on universal laws of symbolism (imitation and contact), which are constantly applied in magic. Cf. Aylward SHORTER, African Culture, An Overview: Socio-Cultural Anthropology (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), 64.

We could say that all possible forms of prayer are comprised between these two extremes of magic on the one side, which uses the Mystery in order to obtain some benefit, and philosophical meditation on the other side, which transforms the Mystery into an object of speculation.⁸ These limits, however, are wide enough to allow for many different expressions of authentic prayer.

3. CHRISTIAN PRAYER

Christian prayer has many sides, and can take many forms. But, firstly, it is rooted in the prayer of Jesus himself and his teaching about prayer. As with his whole life, so too with his prayer two factors are definitive: Jesus prays as one of his people, and simultaneously as the only Son of his heavenly Father. As a Jew Jesus inherits the biblical teaching and practice on prayer, a rich tradition of personal approach to God which becomes therefore the background of Christian prayer.

3.1 Prayer in the Old Testament

Old Testament prayer is not simply the manifestation of a natural awareness of the existence of powers greater than human beings. Rather it is the response to God entering into their history. Consequently, Jewish prayer is always related to time, "bound up with human history, for it

⁸ Rahner gives us two classical Christian definitions of prayer – "speaking to God" (from the Apostolic Fathers) and "raising of the soul to God" (attributed to John Damascene) – which come closer to the extremes between which we can find all forms of prayer. Excessive emphasis on the notion of speaking to God runs the risk of profaning the divine Mystery, of reducing the divine person to the level of other beings or of thinking in terms of magical influence. On the other hand, undue emphasis on "lifting up the heart" may obscure the fact that we meet God in the man Jesus Christ. The history of religions provides examples of both errors. Nevertheless, Rahner warns, we should be careful in judging the prayer of other people, for prayer is an effort to give expression to a personal attitude "which cannot be fully objectified." We must go beyond the words to their ultimate content. This will reveal the true attitude, which will be in some way theistic, "even though combined with idolatry and badly disfigured by magical practices." The same applies to the philosophical or "mystical" forms of prayer in the higher religions, where the encounter with God is vaporised in speculative thinking: "Here too only extremely cautious interpretation will avoid confusing a profoundly religious act with its possible atheistic form of expression." Cf. RAHNER, "Prayer" in Encyclopaedia of Theology. 1268.

is the relationship with God in historical events."⁹ By its very nature it is a response to the God who reveals himself through his action and through the word, particularly the prophetic word.

In Jewish scripture seeking God in prayer seems to be a normal human activity and not the exclusive concern of priest, prophet, or king. In fact, prayer is recognised as a daily obligation (cf. Ps 55:18, 119:164). We can sum up the Old Testament prayer in a list of five characteristics:

1. God is addressed personally, even anthropomorphically. The Israelites conceive God as one who watches over them, hears them when they cry to him, responds to their needs. Still they never reduce him to a purely human personality. God remains always mysterious, beyond human understanding, never to be represented in visible form (cf. Lev 26:1).

2. Biblical prayer involves the whole person, including one's history, culture, and emotional life. No human emotion was excluded.¹⁰ Old Testament prayer was capable of questioning and challenging God; it was also open to God's questions and challenges.

3. Biblical prayer is immersed in the history of Israel. It addresses a God who is actively involved in the history of a particular people, for prayer occurs in the context of the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel (cf. Ex 3:12, Deut 10:10).

4. Although the purpose is not manipulation, the Old Testament prayer is accompanied by an extraordinary confidence of being heard. "The intimacy of the covenant relationship inspired this kind of unshakeable confidence and trust."¹¹

5. Finally, biblical prayer knows a great diversity of forms and styles: "private or public, spontaneous or planned, voiced or muted, intensely personal or highly ritualised." However, no matter the form or style, the all-pervasive attitude is "confidence in the divine goodness, and at the same time a sense of awe before the divine majesty."¹²

⁹ CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, no. 2568.

¹⁰ From almost disrespectful argument (cf. Gen 18:23ff) to peaceful confidence in God's providence (cf. Ps 127), from ardent supplication to despairing protest (cf. Job 31), from adoration, praise and thanksgiving (cf. 1 Chr 29:31) to humble repentance (cf. Ps 51).

¹¹ WRIGHT, A Theology of Christian Prayer, 13.

¹² T. A. LENCHAK, J. KODELL, and A. F. DETSCHER, "Prayer" in The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology, ed. by C. Stuhlmueller (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 757.

3.2 Prayer in the New Testament

The New Testament portrays Jesus habitually at prayer, seeking God at all major turning points in his life. Jesus' prayer becomes the model for his followers. In order to understand his prayer, the Catechism advises us that we must approach him "as Moses approached the burning bush: first to contemplate him in prayer, then to hear how he teaches us to pray."¹³

"And he spent the night in prayer to God" (Lk 6:12)

As a Jew, Jesus learns to pray "in the words and rhythms of his people."¹⁴ Jesus knows the *shema*, which every devout Israelite recited daily (cf. Mk 12:28ff). He refuses to take a meal without first saying a prayer (cf. Mt 14:19; Lk 9:16). Like any pious Jew of his day, Jesus was regularly involved in the synagogue services on the Sabbath and in the temple liturgy in Jerusalem on the great feast days. Temple and synagogue are often the setting for his teaching, healings, and exorcisms (cf. Mt 4:23, Mk 1:23).

As the only Son of his heavenly Father, Jesus' entire life is supported by his interior communion with the Father, which finds its visible expression in prayer. The gospels make it clear that prayer belonged to the essence of his life and mission. "Prayer was simply an integral part of the whole matter of living for him."¹⁵ A distinctive note was his practice of going away from the crowd and his disciples to pray in solitude (cf. Mk 1:35-38), sometimes the whole night (cf. Lk 6:12).

Jesus employed a revolutionary way of addressing God: *Abba* (cf. Mk 14:36), which we may translate as 'dear father' or 'daddy'.¹⁶ This *Abba* epitomises all the childlike submission of Jesus to the Father. He thanks the Father for having revealed the mystery of the Kingdom to little ones (cf.

¹³ CCC, 2598.

¹⁴ CCC, 2599.

¹⁵ WRIGHT, A Theology of Christian Prayer, 25.

¹⁶ Its original Aramaic form has been preserved even in Greek writings because throughout earliest Christianity the memory remained alive that Jesus' special consciousness of being Son was expressed in the address *Abba*. No Jew ever dared address God with the informality and intimacy suggested by the word. Evangelical tradition however preserved the memory of Jesus' precious gift to the disciples, his own familiar way of speaking to the Father (cf. Mk 6:8-13; Lk 11:2-4).

Mt 11:25ff). Before the raising of Lazarus he thanks the Father for having heard him (cf. Jn 11:41ff). Jesus' prayer to the Father on the night he was betrayed (cf. Mt 26:36-46) has been referred to as "the crux of all prayer in the Bible, where surrender is yet addressed to God as Father."¹⁷ The core of this prayer is submission to the Father's will.

We see the depths of Jesus' prayer above all in the prayers he utters on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (cf. Mk 15:34, Ps 22:2). To this is added, in the very moment of death, a saying from Psalm 31: "Into your hands I commend my spirit" (cf. Lk 23:46, Ps 31:5). The only variation is that Jesus uses it with the invocation "Father." As Jeremias has written, "in this single word 'Father' lies the all-holy mystery of his life - and of his prayer."¹⁸

"Master, teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1)

When Jesus prays he is already teaching us how to pray. But the Gospels also give us Jesus' explicit teaching on prayer.¹⁹ One such occasion is when he gives his disciples the Lord's prayer (cf. Mt 6:9-13; Lk 11:1-4). They are to follow his example in addressing God as Father. The object of the first three petitions is the glory of the Father: the sanctification of his name, the coming of the kingdom, and the fulfilment of his will. The other petitions present our wants to him: bread, forgiveness and protection.

The emphasis on seeking first the kingdom of God is presented dramatically in the admonition: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides" (cf. Mt 6:33). The disciples co-operate in the realisation of God's kingdom through their prayer for the labourers who are needed (cf. Mt 9:37-38).

¹⁷ C. W. F. SMITH, "Prayer" in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, vol 4., ed. by G. A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 862.

¹⁸ J. JEREMIAS, *Das Gebetsleben Jesu*, ZNW 25, 1926, 140, quoted in Heinrich ZIMMERMANN, "Prayer" in Encyclopaedia of Biblical Theology, ed. by J. B. BAUER (London: Sheed and Ward, 1970), 82.

¹⁹ "Though the Old Testament, especially the psalms, brings out the place of prayer in the life of Israel, we do not find there a pedagogy of prayer. In the synoptics, on the other hand, Jesus is constantly teaching the Christians how to pray. ... The fact that this instruction was preserved for us by the evangelists... reflects the

Our prayer is not to be ostentatious, and it is not better because it is eloquent or long (cf. Mk 12:40). Christians should pray with childlike simplicity, for all is known to the Father even before we pray to him (cf. Mt 6:8). Prayer must be made before God and not to win people's admiration (cf. Mt 6:6). It must be animated by faith and trust and free of anxiety (cf. Mt 10:31). The prayer of faith consists not only in saying "Lord, Lord," but in disposing the heart to do the will of the Father (cf. Mt 7:21).

The parable of the Pharisee and the publican (cf. Lk 18:9-14) illustrates how important the attitude in prayer is. The Pharisee only has himself and other human beings in view. He is not talking with God, whereas the publican with his petition for pardon is seeking to make contact with God. We must come before God as we really are, not as we might like to pretend to be. Before we can enjoy any other gift of God, we have to be forgiven and stand in his presence.

Jesus also insists on praying with a forgiving heart: reconciliation with one's brother before presenting an offering on the altar (cf. Mt 5:23-24), love of enemies and prayer for persecutors (cf. Mt 5:44). In our prayer we not only stand in the presence of the Father, but also in the presence of our brothers and sisters. We cannot close our hearts to them and open our hearts to the Father.

Prayer is to be persistent: ask, seek, knock (cf. Mt 7:7). Our asking is to be in the name of Jesus (cf. Jn 16:24). Prayer is a way of life, a constant communion with the Father through Jesus, so we can "pray always without becoming weary" (Lk 18:1).

3.3 Prayer in St Paul: The Spirit-Helper

Paul has had a powerful impact on the Christian understanding of prayer. In his view there is an indissoluble link between prayer and the Holy Spirit. Prayer is not something that we must generate by our own power. We are able to pray because of the gift of the Holy Spirit. What Paul writes of confessing Jesus as Lord in 1 Cor 12:3 also applies to praying: "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit."

prayer life of the Christian community at the time when the gospels were written." John SHEETS, The Spirit Prays in Us: Personal Prayer in the New Testament, (Denville, New Jersey: Dimension Books, 1969), 96.

Gal 4:4-7 and Rom 8:12-27 give us the theological foundation of the relationship between prayer and the Holy Spirit.²⁰ In both passages to prove that we are God's children, Paul mentions prayer to the Father, and both times as proof he cites the address *Abba*. Our prayer to the Father is a sign that God makes us his children because the Spirit prays in our prayers.

"The Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Gal 4:6)

In the Letter to the Galatians Paul's reference to prayer comes from the particular orientation of the letter.²¹ Paul wants to show that the gospel has brought what the law could never bring: through the gospel and our faith we have become God's children. He proves his point to the Galatians from the very nature of their prayer as Christians. When the time came, "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children" (4:4-5). This is illustrated in our prayer when we say, 'Father.' We could not say this unless we were given the Spirit of the Son: "And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child" (4:6-7).

The Father's gift of the Spirit enables us to recognise God as our Father and to pray in the way that is properly Christian: an experience of our filial relationship with God.²² The context shows that for Paul this experience is shared by every Christian in his or her prayer. There is no question here of a privileged experience.

²⁰ Other relevant passages are: Eph 3:20; 5:19; 6:18; Rom 15:30; Col 3:16.

²¹ Cf. David M. STANLEY, Boasting in the Lord: The Phenomenon of Prayer in Saint Paul, (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), 120-121.

²² "The vivifying Spirit of the risen Son is the dynamic principle of adoptive sonship (see Rom 1:3, 8:15-17). It empowers the Christian's inmost conviction, as one exclaims of God: 'Father!' Without the Spirit the Christian would never be able to utter this cry." Joseph A. FITZMYER, "The Letter to the Galatians" in The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, ed. by R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, and R. E. Murphy (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), 788.

"That very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom 8:16)

The theme of the Letter to the Romans is essentially the same as that of Galatians: the new life that Christians enjoy, a life in which both the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit are dynamically involved. To maintain this new life within them, Christians must allow themselves to be led by the Spirit: "for all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" (8:14).

It is in this context that Paul speaks of the role of the Spirit in prayer: "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" (8:15-16). We can truly pray as children because we have the Spirit of the Son.

The gift of the Spirit, though it has made us God's children, has not fully liberated us. Our adoptive sonship is only in its initial stage: "not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (8:23). The tension between 'already' and 'not yet' affects the whole existence of believers, and thus also prayer. Prayer, as the language of the Spirit, leads the believers to attain "the highest stage of human discourse" while at the same time to experience "the boundary which still cannot be crossed because of our inadequacy."²³ Despite everything there is only a stammering.

But we have reason to hope, says Paul, in that "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (8:26). Paul emphasises the importance of that element which paradoxically often leads to discouragement in prayer: our weakness. It is the awareness of our inability in seeking God and our utter poverty when we stand in his presence, which provides the occasion for the intervention of the Spirit. The starting-point for all efficacious prayer is therefore the realisation that we do not know how to pray as we ought.²⁴ However, we do not need to be able to articulate the deepest desires of our hearts, because the Spirit knows what we mean and perfects our prayer.

²³ CULLMANN, *Prayer in the New Testament*, 76.

²⁴ "Human aspirations risk being inefficacious because of the natural weakness of the flesh, but the Spirit adds its intercession, transcending such weakness. The result is that the Christian utters what would otherwise be

We can sum up Paul's understanding of prayer as follows: because we have the gift of the Spirit we can pray as children of God. The Spirit of Christ joins himself to our spirit, pleads with us, fulfils what is lacking in our prayer, making it truly the prayer of a child. And so Christian prayer is always marked by a dialectic of suffering and glory:

It consists of weakness, inarticulateness, ignorance of God's will on our part, and, on the part of the intervening Spirit, the creative power that transforms our stumbling efforts into his own intercession.²⁵

4. CHRISTIAN PRAYER IN RECENT CHURCH DOCUMENTS

The *Catechism of Catholic Church* defines authentic Christian prayer in terms of three characteristics: gift, covenant, and communion.

In the first place, prayer is always a grace, a **gift** of the Holy Spirit, a response to something which was previously put on our lips and in our heart. Hence, "humility is the foundation of prayer. Only when we humbly acknowledge that 'we do not know how to pray as we ought' are we ready to receive freely the gift of prayer."²⁶ But prayer is likewise human action. "The indicative 'the Spirit prays in us' does not release us from the imperative 'pray without ceasing'.²⁷ The human being is not a machine kept in motion by God and there can be no question of prayer unless it is rooted in our freedom.²⁸

The second mark of authentic prayer is that it springs from a **covenant**. According to Scripture, it is the heart that prays. The heart is the place of truth and decision, where we choose life or death. "It is the place of encounter, because as image of God we live in relation: it is the

ineffable; to pray 'Abba, Father,' the Spirit must dynamically assist the Christian." FITZMYER, "The Letter to the Romans" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 855.

²⁵ STANLEY, *Boasting in the Lord*, 128-129.

²⁶ CCC, 2559.

²⁷ CULLMANN, *Prayer in the New Testament*, 75.

²⁸ "The essential element of authentic Christian prayer is the meeting of two freedoms, the infinite freedom of God with the finite freedom of man." CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Christian Meditation: Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation* (15 Oct. 1989), no. 3.

place of covenant ... Christian prayer is a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ."²⁹ Thus, Christian prayer is always "in the name" of Jesus (Jn 14:13ff; 15:15; 16:23,26). These words reduce the distance between Creator and creature by showing us that God has turned to us in the incarnation of Christ. Our prayer is a response to the love with which "he first loved us." In the incarnate Christ, the God with whom we speak in prayer has come close to us. This is the meaning of the words "through Christ our Lord," which we often thoughtlessly add at the end of our prayers.³⁰

Third, authentic prayer is **communion**: "the life of prayer is the habit of being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion with him. This communion of life is always possible because, through Baptism, we have already been united with Christ. Prayer is Christian insofar as it is communion with Christ and extends throughout the Church, which is his Body."³¹ Consequently, Christian prayer is at the same time authentically personal and communitarian. The reason for this is the unity of the Spirit, who is the Spirit of the Church and also animates each of the faithful:

There are as many paths of prayer as there are persons who pray, but it is the same Spirit acting in all and with all. It is in the communion of the Holy Spirit that Christian prayer is prayer in the Church.³²

²⁹ CCC, 2563-64.

³⁰ If Christian prayer is to be made "in the name" of Jesus, then it should contain only those petitions which can be genuinely offered in the name – character, spirit – of Jesus. This excludes the use of prayer as a technique for making God do what one wants. The essence of Christian prayer is communion with God and with his will: *not my will but your will be done*. "In this way, God is recognised as God. True prayer ensures that God is God and not an extension of my arm which is too short." Yves CONGAR, I Believe in the Holy Spirit, vol. 2, Lord and Giver of Life (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 116.

³¹ CCC, 2565. See also Christian Meditation, 3: "Christian prayer... expresses the communion of redeemed creatures with the intimate life of the Persons of the Trinity. This communion, based on Baptism and the Eucharist, source and summit of the life of the Church, implies an attitude of conversion, a flight from 'self' to the 'You' of God."

³² CCC, 2672. See also Christian Meditation, 7: "When a Christian prays, even if he is alone, his prayer is in fact always within the framework of the 'Communion of Saints' in which and with which he prays, whether in a public and liturgical way or in a private manner."

5. CONCLUSION

The specificity of Christian life – a life of union with the Word-made-flesh – is what makes Christian prayer distinct from any other kind of prayer. God has personally entered into our lives and united us to himself. By putting his whole human existence at the disposal of God for our salvation, Christ brought about in his own person the perfect covenant between humankind and God (Heb 9:15; 12:24). Through him and in him all human beings can enter into an intimate relationship with God, a relationship of **sonship**. This is possible through the gift of the Spirit, who creates a mysterious identity between the Christian and the risen Christ and empowers us to cry out "Abba, Father!"

CHAPTER II

PRAYER IN WORLD RELIGIONS

Man may forget his Creator or hide far from his face; he may run after idols or accuse the deity of having abandoned him; yet the living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer. In prayer, the faithful God's initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response. As God gradually reveals himself and reveals man to himself, prayer appears as a reciprocal call, a covenant drama. Through words and actions, this drama engages the heart. It unfolds throughout the whole history of salvation.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2567.

1. A UNIVERSAL RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON

As has been noted earlier, prayer is not just one expression of the religious attitude among many, but its primary and most immediate expression. In all acts of prayer we can recognise two essential elements of the religious attitude: acknowledgement of the Mystery and a living relationship with it as salvific reality.

Attitudes to prayer are closely connected with views about God. Each nourishes the other: prayer presupposes a particular view of God and conversely knowledge of God arises from the experience of prayer. We must keep this in mind when studying the phenomenon of prayer in the different world religions. Some traditions speak of God, others prefer to say Supreme Being, while others do not mention God at all. All this explains "the many languages of prayer."¹

2. PRAYER IN ISLAM

The word *prayer* has different meanings and associations in Islam and in Christianity.² Arabic makes a distinction between *salat* (ritual prayer) and *du'a* (invocatory prayer), which does not correspond exactly to the Christian distinction between public worship and personal prayer. When Muslims hear the word *prayer* they think immediately of *salat*, ritual prayer performed five times a day, the details of which are fixed by the law. Christians on the other hand are more inclined to think of prayer as "the raising of the mind to God." Some Muslims have difficulty in appreciating the fact that Christians actually pray, because they do not see the same regular pattern and routine which are characteristic of Islam.

Prayer in Islam means essentially a liturgy: ablutions, scrupulous attention given to the external form, the different positions. What Christians are sometimes tempted to call ritual formalism is for the Muslim an expression of the utter centrality of God. However, this should not

¹ JOHN PAUL II, "Address to the Interreligious Assembly," Vatican City, 28 Oct. 1999, Pro Dialogo Bulletin 103, (2000) no. 1: 9.

² On this question see Robert CASPAR and others, Trying to Answer Questions (Rome: PISAI, 1990), 73.

obscure the fact that Muslims are equally concerned about having the right attitude of total submission to God in prayer:

[Islamic prayer] is not merely a physical motion or a void recital of the Holy Book. It is a matchless and unprecedented formula of intellectual meditation and spiritual devotion, of moral elevation and physical exercise, all combined. It is an exclusively Islamic experience where every muscle of the body joins the soul and the mind in the worship and glory of God.³

2.1 Muslim Practice of Ritual Prayer

Through the profession of faith or *shahada* one becomes a Muslim.⁴ The first expression of active belonging to the Muslim community takes the form of ritual prayer, the most important obligation of Islamic worship. The Prophet is reported to have said, "*Salat* is the pillar of religion and whoever abandons it, demolishes the very pillar of religion."⁵

The call to prayer, which is sung by the muezzin from the top of the minaret, is a reminder of the various times of prayer: dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and night.⁶ From puberty on, every Muslim is bound to observe the five daily prayers. Under special circumstances such as illness, a journey, or war, a modification or limited postponement of these *salats* is allowed.

Although individual performance of the *salat* is permissible, collective prayer (with people standing in rows behind the leader) has special merit. The community aspect, even when in private

³ HAMMUDAH ABDALATI, *Islam in Focus* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1985), 56.

⁴ The *shahada* is the creed: "There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is Allah's prophet." At least once during his or her lifetime a Muslim must recite the Shahada aloud, correctly, thoughtfully, with an understanding of its meaning and with heartfelt conviction.

⁵ Quoted by Badru D. KATEREGGA, *Islam and Christianity: a Muslim and a Christian in Dialogue* (Nairobi: Uzima Press, 1980), 63.

⁶ One tradition explains the establishment of five daily *salats* as follows: when Muhammad is taken up to the highest heaven fifty *salats* daily are imposed on his community by Allah. On his way back Muhammad meets Moses. When Moses hears the order he says: 'Return to thy Lord for the community is not able to bear this. Allah then changes the fifty to twenty-five. On his way back Muhammad tells Moses of the change and receives the same reply. The same processes are repeated until finally the number remains at five. Cf. A. J. WENSINCK, "Salât" in *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. by H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 492-493.

performance, is shown by the fact that the worshipper must face the direction of Mecca. This is the symbolic turning of the whole Muslim community towards the focal point of submission to God.

Each prayer is preceded by ablutions either of the whole body, if one is in a state of major impurity, or partial ablution (forearms, feet, face and mouth), in case of minor impurity. Those praying should be well covered and clothes must be clean. Most important, however, is purity of heart and mind "from false, wrong, and corrupt beliefs and attitudes."⁷

Then one must express one's intention to pray and enter the sacred state of prayer through the formula *Allahu Akbar* and the recitation of the *fatiha*.⁸ There follows two to four liturgical units called *rak'a* (lit. bowing), which include different postures: standing when expressing God's praise; bowing while expressing God's greatness; standing when expressing assurance that God listens; prostrating oneself with forehead touching ground while extolling God's holiness.⁹ The prayer ends with a blessing upon Mohammed, followed by a prayer for blessing in this world and the next and deliverance from hell. Then turning head right and left one says, "Peace be upon you," addressed to those on either side (but also to guardian angels for the practice is followed even when one prays alone). The whole ritual lasts five to ten minutes.¹⁰

⁷ KATEREGGA, *Islam and Christianity*, 63.

⁸ The *fatiha* is the opening chapter of the Qur'an: "In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds: Most Gracious, Most Merciful; Master of the Day of Judgement. Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek. Show us the straight way, the way of those on whom Thou has bestowed Thy Grace, those whose (portion) is not wrath. And who go not astray."

⁹ This is the holiest moment of ritual prayer and it carries a twofold symbolism: on the one hand, the body is in fetal position, ready to be reborn; at the same time it is crouched in the smallest possible place, signifying human nothingness in front of God.

¹⁰ Besides the five daily *salats* there are special community services to be held on certain occasions. The first place among these is occupied by the Friday *salat*. The ritual is the same as for daily prayers, with the extension of the salutations, and specially the sermon, which is usually delivered by the *imam* of the mosque (a literate person who has usually done a minimum of Qur'anic study), relating the scriptural passage for the day to the believer's life. There are also special prayers for major festivals and during the nights of Ramadan.

2.2 Other Prayers

Apart from this fundamental form of ritual prayer, Islam also knows other forms of prayer. First, there is invocatory prayer usually called *du'a*. It may be spontaneous or formal, drawing from rich devotional literature intended for both personal and congregational use. Such are the prayers performed in requesting material advantages or for spiritual well-being. The intention can be a personal one, or can be directed towards the needs of the Islamic community.

Although prayer cannot change God's all-powerful will, petition is acceptable because God himself has invited us to do so.¹¹ God has anticipated our prayers from all eternity and answers them gratuitously. Prayer cannot change God's will, or replace human effort, but it helps human beings to acquire an appropriate attitude in front of God, the one of a poor servant:

O my God, the petitioners stand before Thy gate, and the needy seek refuge in Thy courts. The ship of the wretched stands on the shore of the ocean of Thy grace and goodness, seeking passage into the presence of Thy mercy and compassion. O my God, if in this blessed month Thou forgivest only those whose fasting and performance is right, who will take the part of the transgressor who defaults, when he perishes in the sea of his sins and transgression? O my God, if Thou are merciful only towards the obedient, who will take the part of the rebellious? If Thou receivest only those who have done well, then what of those who have fallen short? O my God, those who fast have surely gained, the faithful doers have victory, and the sincere are delivered. But we, Thy guilty servants, have mercy upon us out of Thy compassion. Liberate us from damnation by Thy pardon; forgive us our trespasses with the rest of the believers, men and women, through Thy mercy, O Thou most faithful.¹²

In Muslim tradition the night has become the time when God's nearness is especially experienced. God comes down at night to hear the petitions of the believers. A well-known 8th-century sufi prayer speaks of divine intimacy with "lovers" of God at this time of the night:

My God and my Lord: eyes are at rest, the stars are setting, hushed are the movements of birds in their nests, of monsters in the deep. And you are the Just who knows no change, the Equity that does not swerve, the Everlasting that never passes away. The doors of kings

¹¹ "I respond to the prayer of every suppliant when he calleth on Me" (Q. 2:186).

¹² This prayer, which stresses the forgiveness sought during the month of Ramadan, illustrates the traditional Muslim stance towards God: the believer is always a petitioner, even a slave. Quoted in Denise L. CARMODY and John T. CARMODY. *Prayer in World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 44.

are locked and guarded by their henchmen, but your door is open to those who call upon you. My Lord, each lover is now alone with his beloved. And I am alone with Thee.¹³

Another common devotional practice is the recitation of the Qur'an, which renders the word of God present in life. The Qur'an is the essential text for all Muslim prayer insofar as it is the word of God given to human beings to be recited back to Him. The recitation of the Qur'an, which is particularly popular during Ramadan, on family feasts, and on feast days such as the Birthday of the Prophet, has to be in Arabic. According to Islamic classical theology, the Arabic text of the Qur'an is the uncreated word of God. Its recitation can be a means to enter into communion with the divine mystery: the divine presence becomes audible, palpable, and a matter of more intense experience.

Muslim religious brotherhoods developed the exercise of *dhikr*. The term itself means 'remembrance' and is related to the Hebrew and Aramaic words for 'mentioning the name of the Lord' (cf. Ps 119:55). *Dhikr* is the mention and the celebration of the name of God, in order to help Muslims recall the presence of God and be less forgetful of the divine majesty.¹⁴ This endless repetition aims at penetrating completely the heart and mind of the believer with the name of God. The rhythms of sound and movement induce a state of interior recollection where the daily pressures of life and ordinary inhibitions are overcome. Habitually there are three stages: the *dhikr* of the tongue, the *dhikr* of the heart, and the *dhikr* of intimacy, in which the whole body and soul of the believer vibrates at the name of God.¹⁵

Finally, there are numerous spontaneous invocations which are continually uttered by Muslims on any occasion: *al-hamdu lillah, ma sha' Allah*, etc. All aspects of the daily life of Muslims take place under the kind and merciful gaze of the Creator and Master of all things.

¹³ Quoted in Huston SMITH, The Illustrated World's Religions: A Guide to Our Wisdom Traditions (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 171.

¹⁴ "Then do ye remember Me: I will remember you. Be grateful to Me, and reject not Faith" (Q. 2:152).

¹⁵ Based on this idea of remembrance Muslim piety has also developed the recitation of the Most Beautiful Names of God. It can be done in private or in community, using a rosary of ninety-nine beads.

2.3 The Sentiments Stressed in Prayer

The chapters of the Qur'an which are regarded as chronologically early portray an experience of God as wholly other. God does not reveal himself, but only manifests his will in the Qur'an. He is infinitely above his creatures and any attempt at intimacy with him would be an act of disrespect towards his majesty. This experience of God as utterly transcendent and beyond human comprehension is focused and defined in the *salat*, through which Muslims recognise God's absolute sovereignty. *Salat* is first of all obedience to God's order.¹⁶ Muslims present themselves before their Lord with fear and reverence, though at the same time trusting in his goodness. They consider themselves *'abd* in the double sense of the word: slave and adorer.

Prayer is equally a proclamation of the greatness of God. This aspect appears clearly in the prayer-gestures, and in the frequency of the use of the formula *Allahu akbar*. Believers prostrate themselves before God and adore him. Muslims are urged to be constant in prayer in order to keep their lives in perspective. The Qur'an considers this the most difficult lesson people must learn. Though human beings are obviously creatures, we are weak and forgetful and keep placing ourselves at the centre of things. Prayer helps to see life objectively, which involves acknowledging our creatureliness before the Creator.¹⁷

There is also in the Qur'an a sense of God's pervasiveness in the world and his nearness to people.¹⁸ God is said to be nearer to human beings than their jugular veins: "It was We Who created man, and We know what suggestions his soul makes to him: for We are nearer to him than his jugular vein" (Q. 50:16). God will "produce a people whom He will love as they will love Him" (Q.

¹⁶ "And be steadfast in prayer: give Zakat, and bow down your heads with those who bow down (in worship)" (Q. 2:43).

¹⁷ "Muslim prayer is the expression of submission to the Lord. At prayer the Muslim above all is a creature trembling in gratitude that Allah should have shown himself compassionate and merciful. lest his power have crushed all creatures to dust." CARMODY, *Prayer in World Religions*, 50.

¹⁸ The 'Light verse' is regarded by many as illustrative of God's all-pervading glory: "Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is as if there were a Niche and within it a Lamp: the Lamp enclosed in Glass: The glass as it were a brilliant star: lit from a blessed Tree, an olive, neither from the East nor of the West, whose Oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it: Light upon Light! Allah doth guide whom He will to His Light" (Q. 24:35).

5:54). Thus, close fellowship with God is at least possible according to the Qur'an. Indeed when Muslims speak of prayer, they also emphasise that it brings human beings nearer to God:

The Muslim, by observing these [ritual] prayers, marks the whole day with a spiritual stamp in the beginning, at the end, and throughout. So he combines religion and life, feels the presence of God within him throughout the day, concludes his daily transactions with a spiritual feeling and builds up his moral prestige on strong foundations.¹⁹

This tension between the immanence and the transcendence of God, between the love for God and the respect that is due to him, explains the still unresolved conflict between Islamic orthodoxy and mysticism.

3. PRAYER IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

A preliminary remark is in order. Not everything that is said is equally applicable to all African peoples. Prayer reflects the diversity of social and physical environments, the psychology of the people, the type of societies, and the notion of divinity, which varies from one culture to another in Africa.²⁰ However, some common elements emerge in most African religious traditions.

Many African peoples have a myth about the former closeness between heaven and earth when communication with God was easy. Human beings cut themselves off from God through some sort of 'original sin' which caused God to withdraw. As a result, African societies developed certain ways of approaching God: prayer, sacrifice, rituals, offerings, etc. Through these acts of worship the human being acts as "priest of the universe," the one who awakens the universe and links it with its

¹⁹ HAMMUDAH ABDALATI, *Islam in Focus*, 59.

²⁰ God's attributes are numerous, as shown in African oral literature, particularly in the prayers. He is the Great Elder, Master of Life, Great Spirit, Chief of Chiefs. Central roof-pole. He is the Creator, "who sews the heavens together like cloth." The symbolism of the Sky shows his transcendence and ubiquity: "God, sky, with stars at your sides and the moon in the middle of your stomach." He is the Man on High, One with very long arms. God is conceived either as immanent -- the source of life in continuation with the process of life -- or as totally transcendent, in which case God remains immanent in the founding ancestors or clan-heroes who are deified. No matter these differences, "the providence, omniscience, and omnipresence of God are vital realities expressed in the African prayers." Aylward SHORTER, *African Culture and the Christian Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1974), 106.

Creator.²¹ The aim is to restore and strengthen the basic structure of forces in the universe which mediate life to humankind. Prayer is the commonest act of worship in Africa, a prime means for communication and interchange with the spiritual powers, on whom the individual and the community depend for life:

Rarely does any important moment pass during each day of an adult's life without a verbal or mental recollection of the power of God and/or the ancestors ... Sickness or good health in the morning, a feast or a funeral, good or bad news – all are recognised by appropriate prayers.²²

3.1 Restoring and Strengthening the Wholeness of Life

Some scholars emphasise the defensive character of African spirituality and consequently of African prayer. Africans, they explain, see their lives as surrounded by hostile forces. In order to preserve this life, they become "notoriously religious" and by implication prayerful. Life is the most precious gift of the Creator, to be protected and prolonged as much as possible. And so, "one reverts to constant prayers and sacrifices to ward-off any calamity."²³ In this line, Magesa sees prayer as one way in which African religion seeks to discover the reasons for disharmony in the universe as well as the measures needed to restore the force of life: "When life is threatened or weakened, prayer is most abundant, both private and public prayer: prayer is a means of restoring wholeness and balance in life."²⁴ Shorter accepts that the occasion for prayer in traditional Africa is often that of a disaster affecting the individual or the community. However, this does not necessarily indicate a God-of-the-gaps mentality because prayers also contain sentiments of praise, gratitude,

²¹ John S. MBITI, The Prayers of African Religion (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976), 68-69. According to Mbiti, Africans beseech spiritual help in order to harmonise the physical with the spiritual realities surrounding them. The prayers they offer – whether working in the fields, fishing in the river, or administering medicine to the sick – aim at bringing together the physical and the spiritual realms.

²² Laurenti MAGESA, African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1998), 177.

²³ Margaret A. UMEAGUDOSU, "The Primacy of Prayer in African Spirituality (Traditional and Christian)," African Christian Studies vol. 9 (March : 1993) no. 1: 25.

²⁴ MAGESA, African Religion, 177.

and acceptance.²⁵ Petition, moreover, can be linked to contrition when the worshipers recognise that misfortune is the result of sin:

God has turned his back on us; the words of men have made him angry. And yet he will turn round again. God has turned his back on us. We are children of our Maker and are not afraid that he will kill us.²⁶

Prayer acknowledges that harmony in the world depends on powers greater than ours. Accordingly, the individual or the community approach God in prayer with a sense of their weakness and God's power: "You are above me, I am below;" "We have no strength." The worshipper's humility can also be expressed by some pretence of ignorance: "A person who doesn't know the difference between good and bad cannot make you angry." Still, the African at prayer can be confident because the powers addressed have kinship obligations towards their "children":

Calling on you, I pass the day; calling on you, I pass the night. When the moon rises, I do not forget you. Let the danger pass me by, God, my Lord, you sun with thirty rays. God, you hold the bad and the good in your hand; my Lord, do not allow us to be killed, we, your little ones, are praying to you.²⁷

3.2 Features of African Traditional Prayer

Although anybody can pray at any time, there are ritual functionaries who pray on behalf of others: priests, clan elders, rainmakers, diviners, medicine-men, and others. Some of them hold ritual authority by virtue of age, genealogy, or political office. Ritual authority is often a sanction for secular and domestic authority.

Being in community shapes the African personality: *I am because I belong*. Thus, African prayer is always corporate in character. Even when praying alone, one is expected to "associate himself in prayer with his kinsmen and neighbours, and with the dead [who] pray and share with the living in worship."²⁸

²⁵ SHORTER, African Culture and the Christian Church, 109.

²⁶ DINKA (Sudan), quoted in Desmond TUTU, An African Prayer Book (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), 44.

²⁷ BORAN (Kenya), quoted in Tutu, An African Prayer Book, 132.

²⁸ SHORTER, African Culture and the Christian Church, 109.

Prayer may be verbalised in speech or song. A good number of prayers have a responsive form which emphasises the community participation in prayer as well as the common nature of the needs expressed. Prayers tend to be stereotyped in Africa, but with possible accommodation according to the occasion. Some prayers, however, have been used repeatedly by past generations and have become formal. Most of them take a poetical form, which helps for memorisation and recitation. They are usually ascribed to ancestors and national heroes. This shows the importance of remembrance in African prayer: "There is a strong consciousness of the necessity of continuity and tradition. Prayer and worship are effective because they are part of this tradition, and it is therefore important to worship in the way the ancestors worshipped, to be at one with them in prayer."²⁹

Another aspect of traditional Africa that has been carried over into prayer is the idea of mediation, which is meant to enhance the importance of the person addressed. This explains the place in prayer of spiritual beings such as the Earth Mother, Master of the Animals, nature spirits and ancestral spirits. It also accounts for the apparent departmentalisation of African worship.³⁰ However, even when prayer is addressed to these lesser divinities, the idea of DIVINITY is always in the background as the ultimate addressee of prayer.³¹

Africans at prayer express themselves in an uninhibited way, more forthright and honest than usual. Without honesty, the powers addressed might not appreciate the extent of suffering. Not to open oneself completely may result in one's prayers not being fully effective:

If you love me set me free, I beg you from my heart. If I do not pray to you from my heart, you do not hear me. If I pray to you from my heart, you know it and you are kind to me.³²

²⁹ SHORTER, *African Culture and the Christian Church*, 111-112.

³⁰ Observing Africans praying to diverse deities for diverse needs led to hasty criticisms of polytheism. Nonetheless, for many Africans, praying to a particular deity is a helpful way of concretising the general relationship between humanity and divinity. It helps to make God imaginable and approachable.

³¹ Not all scholars agree with the view that God is the ultimate horizon of all worship. Justin Ukpog, for instance, stresses the real autonomous importance of spiritual entities and lesser divinities. They are the exclusive recipients of prayers and sacrifices offered to them. Cf. Justin S. UKPONG, "The problem of God and sacrifice." *Journal of Religion in Africa* 14 (1983) no. 2: 187-203, quoted in Fernando DOMINGUES, *Christ Our Healer: A Theological Dialogue with Aylward Shorter* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2000), 39.

³² BORAN (Kenya), quoted in Tutu. *An African Prayer Book*, 133.

Some prayers are offered regularly, often incorporating the symbolism of the various times of the day. Morning prayers usually show a concern for moral-spiritual purity: "O sun, as you rise in the east through God's leadership, wash away all evils of which I have thought throughout the night."³³ The Sérèr of Senegal, as they go to sleep, give a religious significance to three familiar actions: "I stretch out the Earth. I wrap myself in God. I lay my head on the great stone."³⁴

Different postures are variously adopted in prayer: people may kneel, sit down, prostrate themselves, stand, or clap their hands and sing. Although prayers may be purely vocal and are not necessarily accompanied by sacrifices or offerings, the opposite is not the case. Prayers always accompany offerings and sacrifices, so that the purpose of the sacrifice or offering may be declared.

3.3 Types of Prayer

Though not the only kind of prayer, petition is nevertheless very common in traditional Africa. In this respect, requests are always concrete: health, prosperity, longevity, offspring, rain, victory, acceptance of sacrifices and offerings. There is a tendency to accompany one's petitions with recitations of God's attributes, especially those that suggest that God will grant the worshipper a favourable hearing. A typical petition usually includes the following elements: (1) presentation of the problem; (2) petition itself which expresses human dependence without excluding human action; (3) honour rendered in the confident hope that the powers will act.³⁵ The Baluba of Congo offer us a good example of the structural elements and basic expectations of African prayer:

God, supreme Being: here I am utterly miserable. All my goods are gone with the wind. My family and my yard have neither top nor bottom. I who have never stolen, I who have never bewitched anyone, my misery overcomes me. God, supreme Being, *Tshitundu*, son of heaven: since I took nothing from anyone, this distress, if it comes from you, please free me

³³ ABALUYIA (Kenya), quoted in Mbiti, *The Prayers of African Religion*, 31.

³⁴ Quoted in SECRETARIATUS PRO NON-CHRISTIANIS, *Meeting the African Religions* (Roma: Libreria Editrice Ancora, 1969), 179.

³⁵ Cf. SHORTER, *African Culture and the Christian Church*, 110.

from it. If it comes from a man or a spirit, may he perish, carried away by the current. Let me go upstream again.³⁶

Another common type of prayer is that of gratitude and praise. God may be thanked for a safe journey, rain, offspring, prosperity, preservation from danger, or for accepting sacrifices. Praise is often expressed in the descriptive names and attributes of God: Deliverer of those in trouble, Great Shield, Friend of this village, Benefactor, Saving Spirit, Great Mantle, Giver of all things. Praise and gratitude involve not only thanksgiving but also a readiness to act: "I am your warrior, ready to act in accordance to your will." People may also address praise and appreciation to God for his greatness, his kindness, and his readiness to listen to them:

The sky above us is like a warm, soft Kente cloth, because you are behind it, else it would be cold and rough and uncomfortable. We drink in your creation and cannot get enough of it.³⁷

3.4 The Sacredness of Life

Traditional Africa shows a great respect for the sacredness of life: "Life must be given; life must be lived; life is to be enjoyed; life is to be whole; life is to be honourable; life is to be long and peaceful."³⁸ God is the one to whom nothing is impossible, the one who can overrun all misfortunes. Prayer thus provides ultimate recourse and helps to remove personal and communal fears and worries.

It is true that belief in witchcraft and evil spirits has made numerous rituals defensive or curative. Still, the God addressed in most African prayers is a giver of health, strength, and joy. "On the whole, sexual pleasure, the pleasure of eating and drinking, of dancing and singing, and of harvesting good crops and raising numerous healthy children have been the preferred place for finding God's blessings."³⁹ When these gifts are lacking Africans raise their protest and beg redress.

³⁶ Quoted in SECRETARIATUS PRO NON-CHRISTIANIS. Meeting the African Religions, 173-174.

³⁷ ASHANTI (Ghana), quoted in Tutu, An African Prayer Book, 60.

³⁸ Peter K. SARPONG, quoted in Chidi Denis ISIZOH. "Reflecting on Tribal Values," Pro Dialogo Bulletin 99 (1998) no. 3: 297.

³⁹ CARMODY. Prayer in World Religions, 143.

African prayer makes us aware that one of the closest and most precious gifts we have received from God is our bodily life: our energy, appetite, love, and desire.

4. CONCLUSION

Though historians, psychologists, and anthropologists debate various theories concerning the origin of prayer, the fact remains that the act of prayer itself is of great significance to all believers. Ludwig Feuerbach summed this up when he stated: "The most intimate essence of religion is revealed by the most simple religious act: prayer."⁴⁰ It is not possible to do justice to the reality of prayer in any religion in a few lines. We trust, however, that this brief survey of the phenomenon of prayer in Islam and African Traditional Religion will show that each tradition has offered an effective framework of meaning for generations of men and women. These traditions have carried them through the different stages of life, providing consolation in sickness and calamity, and enabling them to celebrate their times of health and well-being. In the religious traditions of the world, with their many languages of prayer,

we hear re-echoed, as it were, the voices of those who for a thousand years have sought God in a manner which, while imperfect, has always been sincere and upright. These religions, possessing as they do, a splendid patrimony of religious writings, have taught generations of men how to pray (EN 53).

⁴⁰ Encyclopædia Britannica, 1994 –1999 ed., s.v. "Prayer."

CHAPTER III

TOWARDS A THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF PRAYER IN WORLD RELIGIONS

What seems to bring together and unite, in a particular way, Christians and the believers of other religions is an acknowledgement of the *need for prayer* as an expression of man's spirituality directed towards the Absolute. Even when, for some, he is the Great Unknown, he nevertheless remains always in reality the same living God. We trust that wherever the human spirit opens itself in prayer to this Unknown God, an echo will be heard of the same Spirit who, knowing the limits and weakness of the human person, himself prays in us and on our behalf, 'expressing our plea in a way that could never be put into words' (Rom 8:26). The intercession of the Spirit of God who prays in us and for us is the fruit of the mystery of the redemption of Christ, in which the all-embracing love of the Father has been shown to the world.

John Paul II, *A Message to the Peoples of Asia*,
Manila, Feb. 21, 1981.

1. BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE PRAYER OF THE NATIONS

Our approach to the prayer of other religions is closely linked to how we look at the plurality of faiths in the world. Admittedly, there is a certain amount of biblical ambiguity regarding other religions. Nevertheless, there is a tendency among some scholars today to see the plurality of religions as part of the riches of God-given reality, an expression of the greatness of the mystery of God. This view is based on a biblical interpretation which remains open to a broad understanding of God's action within history by focusing on themes such as the goodness of creation, God's universal covenant with humankind, and the wisdom shared by all peoples.

1.1 God's Covenants with Humankind

To be sure, the Bible is mainly concerned with the *special salvation history* – centred on the chosen people of God, culminating in the paschal event with the outpouring of the Spirit. However, the Bible also indicates that God has spoken with human beings and made covenants with them from the very beginning and down through the ages. Actually, biblical tradition describes the historical unfolding of the divine plan of salvation in terms of four successive covenants:¹

First, a covenant established by God with the whole of humanity as personified by Adam and Eve. Although the Hebrew term for covenant – *b'rit* – is not found in the Genesis narrative, there are indications that Israel understood creation as a cosmic covenant (cf. Jer 33:20-26).

Second, God's covenant with Noah, a symbol of the divine covenant established with the nations: "I am establishing my *covenant* with you and your descendants after you" (Gen 9:9), that is, a personal, universal intervention on the part of God in the history of the nations, before the covenant with Israel. The religious traditions of humanity can be seen as the living witnesses of this covenant with the nations in Noah.

¹ The reading of the history of salvation through four covenants goes back at least to Irenaeus. *Adv. Haer* III, 11, 8, quoted in DP 25. This is not however the only possible systematisation of the various biblical covenants. From a clearly priestly perspective. Jesus Sirach sets Israel's history into periods by means of seven covenants. These are the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Aaron, Phinehas, and David (Sir 44-47). On the

Third, God's covenant with Israel, which occurs in two stages: the choice of Abraham, with the promise and the covenant sealed in circumcision (cf. Gen 15-17); and the revelation to Moses, with the Exodus and the covenant at the foot of Mount Sinai (cf. Ex 3-20). This covenant constitutes the chosen people, conferring on Israel a special vocation with regard to the nations.

Finally, the definitive covenant with humanity established by God in Jesus Christ: "This cup that is poured out for you is *the new covenant* in my blood" (Lk 22:20).

It is important to notice that all of these covenants are marked by the ritual celebration of sacrifices (cf. Gen 8:20-21; Gen 15,22; Ex 24; Heb 10).

In Christian tradition we have had, at different times, a negative understanding of the value of other religions. The universal dimension of God's salvific design was underemphasised within biblical theology. Ordinarily, Abraham's call was seen as the point of departure, as if God called only the people of Israel. However, the first chapters of Genesis remind us that the setting in which God's plan of salvation unfolds is the whole of creation, where the history of humankind takes place. Abraham's call and the election of Israel would have no meaning except as part of this overall plan. Creation itself was the primordial covenant and God does not break his word. Likewise, God upholds the covenant with Noah, which involves all peoples independently of the community of faith. The one God is the God of all peoples. They too are in a state of covenantship with God. Thus, biblical revelation presupposes a basic human community, which underlies all other communities, to which God's universal will for salvation relates. This universal covenant provides the context within which other covenants become possible: "Since God has covered the earth with promises, other and more particular promises can be made."²

concept of "Covenant" in biblical theology cf. Norbert LOHFINK and Erich ZENGER, The God of Israel and the Nations: Studies in Isaiah and the Psalms (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 11-31.

² Terence E. FRETHERM, "The Book of Genesis" in The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, vol. 1, ed. by Leander E. Keck and others (Nashville: Abingdom Press, 1994), 401.

1.2 The Prayer of the Nations

Are there in the Bible significant indications of a prayer relationship between God and non-Israelites? Generally speaking, the threat of idolatry made Israel intransigent towards the religions of other nations. The biblical message recognises, however, that not all the peoples of the nations are idolatrous. The Bible also speaks about human beings responding to God with prayers and sacrifices which are pleasing to God, as in the stories of Abel, Noah, and Melchizedek. Abimelech's prayer was heard (cf. Gen 20), as were the prayers of the Ninevites at the time of Jonah (cf. Jon 1:14-16). There is no indication that Jethro's sacrifice (cf. Ex 18:12), Naaman's offerings (cf. 1 Kg 5:17), and Nebuchadnezzar's prayer of thanksgiving (cf. Dan 4:43-47) were not acceptable to God. Balaam (cf. Num 22) and Cyrus (cf. Is 44-45) are non-Israelites who exercised a ministry for the chosen people and on their behalf. All these are represented as people who raise their hearts in prayer to God who answers them. Malachi appears to say that all authentic worship reaches the one God: "For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering" (Mal 1:11).

2. THE ROMAN CANON: A PRAYER FOR ACCEPTANCE

The Roman canon contains an interesting text which can help us in view of an assessment of the prayers and rites of the various religious traditions of the world:

Father... look with favour on these offerings and accept them as once you accepted the gifts of your servant Abel, the sacrifice of Abraham, our father in the faith, and the bread and wine offered by your priest Melchizedek.³

³ The Roman canon was for a long time the only eucharistic prayer of the Roman Church. The text as we have it today acquired its form between the end of the 4th century and the 7th century, and has not been changed significantly since the days of Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604). Ambrosiaster (4th century) is a witness to the phrase: *summus sacerdos tuus Melchisedech*, which he tries to correct in accordance with his understanding of the Greek text. He obviously presupposes a Greek original. Cf. Enrico MAZZA, The Eucharistic Prayers of the Roman Rite (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1986), 53-59.

According to this text, the Church asks that its own offering of the body and blood of Christ may be acceptable to God like the ancient sacrifices of Abel, Abraham, and Melchizedek were accepted. This deserves some consideration.

The biblical theme of acceptance of sacrifices begins with Abel's sacrifice (Gen 4:4-5). This story shows that there can be no approval of a sacrifice without simultaneous approval of the person offering. In the same line, the prophetic criticism of Israel's cult was not directed to the cult as such, but rather to cultic celebrations in which the spotlessness of the offering was not matched by a spotlessness in the person offering.⁴ Human beings come before God as they are. The value of the offerings cannot provide a substitute for a correct interior attitude. To pray for acceptance is to acknowledge that worship is not magical and has no power to produce its effects automatically. God is supremely free even in regard to a cult which he himself has prescribed.⁵

No offering therefore is in itself worthy of God. The "pleasing odour of sacrifice" is not an objective quality inherent in the sacrifice and resulting from its perfect execution. It indicates rather a quality in the sacrifice that God alone can perceive. The story of Abel gives us the criterion according to which God freely accepts sacrifice: "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" (Gen 4:7). In other words, God cannot accept a sacrifice while ignoring the life of the one offering.

In the passage under consideration, God is asked to look upon our offering with favour.⁶ As a reason for acceptance, the Canon introduces a comparison with three Old Testament sacrifices which God found particularly pleasing: the sacrifices of Abel, Abraham, and Melchizedek. They serve as models of what our sacrifice should be. The reference here is to the personages as such and not to the particular rites which they may have practised:

⁴ Cf. 1 Sam 15:22; Am 5:21-26; Isa 1:11-20, Jer 7:4-12.

⁵ "In all this, we are far-removed from a present-day theology which is concerned primarily with the real presence of God in cult. A theology of acceptance is concerned rather with the cultic presence of human beings before God. It is for God to decide whether to accept or reject those who come before him in worship." MAZZA, *The Eucharistic Prayers of the Roman Rite*, 61.

⁶ Since the Eucharist is a memorial of the sacrifice of Christ, how could it not be acceptable to God? And yet, even though this memorial is in itself always acceptable, the fact is that it does not exist simply in itself, abstractly. It exists insofar as it is celebrated and it is inseparable from its celebrant. The Roman canon stresses that there must be continuity and coherence between cult and life.

The three names thus reinforce the idea that divine acceptance of sacrifice does not depend on the logic of the rite but on the quality of the offerer. It is as exemplary offerers that the three are presented to us.⁷

The presence of these personages in the Roman canon seems to imply a recognition in their offerings and sacrifices of some sort of prophetic anticipation of the Christ-event, in which the prayers and sacrifices of the ancient economy came to be fulfilled.⁸ Just as other covenants between God and humanity are not abolished but fulfilled in Christ, so the prayers and ritual expressions which are a sign of fidelity to those covenants retain their value and goodness until they are fulfilled in the participation through faith in the sacrifice of Christ.⁹

According to Sottocornola, it is possible to see the sacrifice of Abel as well as the sacrifice offered by Noah (cf. Gen 8:2-22) as the symbol of all the religious expressions of traditional religions, which are historically the first concretisation of human religious experience. Abraham's sacrifice would stand as a symbol of the religious expressions of all the Abrahamic religions. Finally, in the mysterious sacrifice offered by Melchizedek we could recognise a symbol of all other forms of religious experience that God has stirred up in the long history of humankind.¹⁰

⁷ MAZZA, The Eucharistic Prayers of the Roman Rite, 80.

⁸ By his death Abel stands as the first martyr and foreshadows the sacrificed Christ, who was put to death because of his justice. In the sacrifice of Abraham, which is commemorated during the Easter Vigil, Isaac is seen as an image of Christ. Melchizedek's sacrifice of bread and wine shows that ancient sacrifices, even when acceptable to God, derived their value from the fact that they prefigured the sacrifice of Christ (Heb 8-10).

⁹ With regard to Jewish observance of the religious observances of the Old Testament, the Council of Florence (1438-1445) asserted that the Church "does not deny that between the passion of Christ and the promulgation of the Gospel they could be observed, provided one in no way believed that they were necessary for salvation. But she asserts that *after the promulgation of the Gospel* they cannot be observed without the loss of eternal salvation" (DS 1348, emphasis added). But how are we to understand the "promulgation of the Gospel" here? Rahner rightly remarks that it must be understood existentially: when Christianity "reaches man in the real urgency and rigour of his actual existence." i.e., when individual conscience has imposed on an individual person, in virtue of the gift of faith, the obligation to adhere to Jesus Christ as Saviour." Karl RAHNER, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions" in *Id.*, Theological Investigations, vol. 5, (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 120.

¹⁰ Cf. SOTTOCORNOLA, Franco, "Biblical Perspectives on Interreligious Prayer," Pro Dialogo Bulletin 98 (1998) no. 2: 179.

In eliminating the sacrifices of old, Daniélou comments, Jesus Christ did not destroy them but completed them.¹¹ All prayers and sacrifices of humankind, all acts of worship that are pleasing to God (and we have good reason to believe that God's acceptance depends on the sincerity of the life of the person offering), could be seen as taken up by Christ, who "has united himself in a certain manner to every man" (GS 22) and offered by him to the Father in the eternal sacrifice of himself.

3. LIMITS OF THE PRAYER OF THE NATIONS¹²

Some radical proponents of a pluralistic approach to the theology of religions argue that, since there is only one God and one plan of salvation, all expressions of religion (including prayer) are interconnected and mutually complementary. As the Mystery is universally active and present, none of its mediations can claim to be the ultimate and definitive one.¹³ That position, however, cannot be reconciled with Scripture or Christian tradition.

Scripture strongly warns against worship which encourages idolatry or harms human dignity (cf. Jer 10:1-16; Is 44:9-20; Ps 106:28-30). Biblical tradition shows a horror of magic because magic suggests that God is under the power of human beings. Cult must always respect the freedom and supreme lordship of God (cf. Jdt 8:11-17). This warning requires of us a keen sense of discernment in evaluating forms of prayer and worship which corrupt God's image or are socially harmful.

Therefore, we cannot say *a priori* that all forms of prayer are equal since, it is alleged, the same addressee is invoked under different names. From a specifically Christian perspective, the

¹¹ "Through Him all the sacrifices of all the peoples, every endeavour of man to glorify God, all are borne to the Father and reach Him: *Per ipsum et cum ipso et in ipso. est tibi Deo Patri omnipotenti omnis honor et gloria.*" Jean DANIELOU, Holy Pagans of the Old Testament (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1957), 109.

¹² In this chapter we are attempting a *Christian theological* understanding of the prayer of other religions. We do not claim the objective detachment of a comparative history of religions or a phenomenology of religions. Being our approach theological, the point of departure is a faith commitment. Any value judgement is made from the point of view of our Christian faith in Jesus Christ.

¹³ Cf. John HICK, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity" in The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions, ed. by J. Hick and P. E. Knitter (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987), 16-36.

International Theological Commission distinguishes between the subjective attitude of the believer and the objective value of a particular mediation:

A polytheistic prayer may be directed to the true God, since a salvific action may occur through an erroneous mediation. But this does not mean that this religious mediation is objectively recognised as a salvific mediation, although it does mean that this authentic prayer was enkindled by the Holy Spirit.¹⁴

The Holy Spirit can nevertheless use a particular mediation which is objectively erroneous (e.g. a polytheistic prayer) as the vehicle for a salvific action. A similar view, although more restrictive, is expressed in the Declaration *Dominus Iesus*:

Certainly, the various religious traditions contain and offer religious elements which come from God, and which are part of what 'the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures, and religions' (RM 29). Indeed, some prayers and rituals of the other religions may assume a role of preparation for the Gospel, in that they are occasions or pedagogical helps in which the human heart is prompted to be open to the action of God.¹⁵

These prayers and rituals are to be counted therefore among the *semina Verbi* which the Church recognises with joy and respect. However, due to the presence of superstition and error, we cannot conclude that all prayers and rituals have "a divine origin or an *ex opere operato* salvific efficacy, which is proper to the Christian sacraments." In fact, some rituals, insofar as they depend on superstition or other errors, may indeed constitute "an obstacle to salvation."¹⁶

Thus any theological evaluation related to the prayer of other religions must be necessarily qualified. However, we must always keep in mind that faith is first of all a *relationship* with God. Beliefs, prayers and rituals are only mediations. What saves is faith. The 'objective' value of these mediations cannot provide a substitute for a correct interior attitude.

¹⁴ INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION. *Christianity and the World Religions*, no. 17.

¹⁵ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH. *The Lord Jesus: Declaration Dominus Iesus on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*, (Aug. 6, 2000), no. 21.

¹⁶ *Dominus Iesus*, no. 21.

The majority of the great religions which have sought union with God in prayer have also pointed out ways to achieve it. Some have developed well-tested methods of contemplation and of mystical identification with the Absolute.¹⁷ They should not be rejected out of hand simply because they are not Christian. On the contrary, "one can take from them what is useful so long as the Christian conception of prayer, its logic and requirements are never obscured."¹⁸ There exists "a strict relationship between Revelation and prayer,"¹⁹ and therefore, for a Christian, "it is impossible to arrive at a perfect love of God if one ignores his giving of himself to us through his Incarnate Son."²⁰ In Jesus the human being, we experience God and nothing less: "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19). Jesus does not just give us some knowledge about God so that we are well-informed people; Jesus is God's self-giving to us. The Jesus-event is a constituting event of God's own reality.

4. THE HOLY SPIRIT: THE PRIME MOVER OF ALL PRAYER

Since the beginning of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II committed himself to follow the example of his predecessors in openness towards the spiritual values of other religions. The full significance of this commitment can be seen not only in his doctrinal teaching but also in his actions in relation to other believers. The most important initiative the Pope has taken in the field of interreligious relations so far has been the Day of Prayer for Peace, held in Assisi, Oct. 27, 1986.²¹

¹⁷ Cf. Thomas RYAN, "The Impact of Interreligious Relations on the Practice of Meditation," The Living Light vol. 32 (winter 1995) no. 2: 41-50.

¹⁸ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Christian Meditation: Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation (Oct. 15, 1989), no. 16.

¹⁹ Christian Meditation, no. 6.

²⁰ Christian Meditation, no. 20.

²¹ Cf. Michael FITZGERALD, "Pope John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue: A Catholic Assessment" in John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue, ed. by B. L. Sherwin and H. Kasimov (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1999), 208.

4.1 The Experience of Assisi

January 1986 was declared the beginning of the International Year for Peace. John Paul II announced an initiative which surprised many people. He declared that he would invite leaders from all the world religions to Assisi the following October to take part in a day of prayer for world peace.

The day was important both for its contents and its style. In order to avoid any semblance of relativism or syncretism, it was proposed that each group should have its own place to pray according to its own tradition. As the Pope put it in his opening address:

The fact that we have come here does not imply any intention of seeking a religious consensus among ourselves or of negotiating our faith convictions. Neither does it mean that religions can be reconciled at the level of a common commitment in an earthly project which would surpass them all. Nor it is a concession to relativism in religious beliefs, because every human being must sincerely follow his or her upright conscience with the intention of seeking and obeying the truth.²²

After the initial greeting by the Pope, each group of believers – Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, African and American Traditional Religionists, Sikhs, Jains, Bahais, Shintoists, Zoroastrians – was directed to its place of prayer. Throughout the day, a fast was observed. At the final ceremony, all participants gathered in front of the Basilica of St Francis, where representatives of each religion read aloud their prayer and the others listened in respectful silence. The Pope thanked the religious leaders for their presence and reflected upon the meaning of what they had done together that day: "Perhaps more than ever before in history, the intrinsic link between an authentic religious attitude and the great good of peace has become evident to all."²³

²² JOHN PAUL II, "To Representatives of Various Religions on the World Day of Prayer for Peace", Assisi, Oct. 27, 1986, in Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church (1963-1995), ed. by Francesco Gioia (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997), 344.

²³ JOHN PAUL II, "To Representatives of the Various Religions of the World at the Conclusion of the World Day of Prayer for Peace", Assisi, Oct. 27, 1986, in Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching, 350.

The important implications of Assisi for interreligious dialogue need to be highlighted. First, Assisi conferred legitimacy to Christian initiatives in interreligious dialogue.²⁴ Indeed the Catholic Church, inspired by Assisi, has shown its commitment to interreligious dialogue both by organising encounters and by participating in events promoted by other religions or organisations.

Second, Assisi was recognised as an "act of dialogue in the highest degree. To prayer, which was its climate and soul, were added other manifestations of contact, respect, and mutual knowledge."²⁵ Assisi represented an outstanding form of dialogue, involving mind and heart. It was also the most difficult form of dialogue. Still, it remains just a first step: "We are still stammering in this kind of dialogue, which is more difficult than social or political dialogue, but much more important because it commits the whole person in his relation to God."²⁶

Third, the Assisi event emphasised the importance of prayer in the quest for peace and in interreligious encounters. In underlining the *religious* nature of peace, it recognised that all religions have a serious contribution to make to the quest for peace:

The coming together of so many religious leaders to pray is in itself an invitation today to the world to become aware that there exists another dimension of peace and another way of promoting it which is not the result of negotiations, political compromises or economic bargaining. It is the result of prayer which, in the diversity of religions, expresses a relationship with a supreme power that surpasses our human capacities alone.²⁷

We need prayer because peace is above all a gift from God. Moreover, prayer encourages people to examine their consciences, to recognise and accept their faults, to ask forgiveness and to seek reconciliation with their neighbour. Prayer helps to achieve the conversion of heart.

²⁴ "When the Pope himself initiates such a meeting and acts as the host, what higher authority do Catholics need?" Stanley J. SAMARTHA, One Christ—Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 15.

²⁵ Marcello ZAGO, "Day of Prayer for Peace," Pro Dialogue Bulletin 22 (1987) no. 1: 150-151.

²⁶ Roger ETCHEGARAY. "L'esprit d'Assise," Chemins de Dialogue (1996), no. 7: 16, quoted in O. Degryse, Interreligious Dialogue: The Asian Churches Set the Tone (Louvain: 1999), 15.

²⁷ JOHN PAUL II, "To Representatives of various Religions on the World Day of Prayer for Peace", Assisi, Oct. 27, 1986, in Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching, 343.

Finally and most importantly, Assisi was an event of profound theological significance as it proclaimed symbolically the legitimacy of other religions in the saving plan of God. Other religions and their prayer traditions are effective before God:

The welcome given to the religious representatives and people being present at the prayer offered by the various religions was in some way a recognition of these religions and of prayer in particular, a recognition that these religions and prayer not only have a social role but are *effective before God*.²⁸

Assisi was not free of controversy however. Some commentators expressed their disappointment at the formula chosen, which the Pope had described as "being together in order to pray."²⁹ Religious leaders accepted in good faith the invitation *to pray together* for peace. Yet, when the time came to pray together, each group of believers had to go to different places: "The geographical separation became a symbol of spiritual separation."³⁰ However, this and other controversial points in no way minimise the importance of Assisi. Assisi marks the beginning of new relationships between Christians and other believers on the universal and local levels: the encounter through prayer and action for justice. To be sure, this is a type of encounter which benefits all religions: "Indeed, we know that earthly kingdoms meet and clash at the borders, meaning in what is most exterior to them; spiritual kingdoms, however, touch and meet through the heart."³¹

²⁸ ZAGO, "Day of Prayer for Peace", 150 (emphasis added).

²⁹ "What will take place at Assisi will certainly not be religious syncretism but a sincere attitude of prayer to God in an atmosphere of mutual respect. For this reason the formula chosen for the gathering at Assisi is: being together in order to pray. Certainly we cannot 'pray together,' namely, to make a common prayer, but we can be present while others pray. In this way we manifest our respect for the prayer of others and for the attitude of others before the divinity." JOHN PAUL II, "To the Faithful in General Audience", Rome, Oct. 22, 1986, in *Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching*, 341.

³⁰ SAMARTHA, *One Christ-Many Religions*, 15-16. There has been considerable discussion on this point. Some people think that persons of different beliefs can pray together because the ultimate addressee of all prayer is the Holy Mystery, not the image or the concept used. Others regret the "slippery subtleties" of the language as not helpful in interreligious meetings: "If people of different faiths cannot pray together, why were they invited to pray together?" SAMARTHA, *One Christ-Many Religions*, 16.

³¹ DE BETHUNE, Pierre F., "Quelques réflexions après la Journée Mondiale de Prière à Assise," *Pro Dialogo Bulletin* 22 (1987) no. 1: 157.

4.2 Assisi Explained

In a solemn address to the Roman Curia on Dec. 22, 1986, John Paul II drew the theological significance of the Assisi Day.³² The Pope saw in the Assisi Day of Prayer "a visible illustration, a concrete example, a catechesis, intelligible to all" of the meaning of the Church's commitment to ecumenism and interreligious dialogue [7]. More clearly than ever before, the Pope laid down the theological foundation for such dialogue, referring to a twofold "mystery of unity" already existing between Christians and those who remain "orientated" toward the Church [8]:

First, there is a "radical unity" based on the common origin and destiny of all humanity in creation. This unity, "which belongs to the very identity of the human being," is reflected in the oneness of the divine image which each one bears in oneself and *per se* gives the orientation to a common goal:

There is *only one* divine plan for every human being coming into this world (cf. Jn 1:9), one single origin and goal, whatever may be the colour of his skin, the historical and geographical framework within which he happens to live and act, or the culture in which he grows up and expresses himself [3].

Second, the fundamental unity based on the mystery of universal redemption in Christ, who "died for all" and is therefore "the Saviour of the world" [4]. Despite differences of every type, and first of all religious differences, all human beings "are included in the great and unique design of God in Jesus Christ, who 'has united himself in a certain manner to every man' (GS 22), even if the person in question is not aware of this" [5].

This twofold mystery of unity based on the event of creation and redemption "cannot fail to leave a trace in the lived reality of people, even when they belong to different religions" [7]. These "seeds of the Word" sown among others constitute the concrete foundation of interreligious dialogue [7].

³² JOHN PAUL II, "To the Roman Curia", Rome, Dec. 22, 1986, in Interreligious Dialogue: The Official Teaching, 359-367. The numbers in brackets after the quotations refer to the paragraphs of the text.

Commenting on this address, Dupuis notes that the concept of unity among the human family in creation and redemption is taken from Vatican II (cf. NA 1).³³ On one point, however, the Pope spoke more clearly than any of the Council documents, namely *on the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the religious life of the members of other religious traditions*. The Pope saw in Assisi still another "wonderful manifestation" of that unity that binds us together beyond differences and divisions: the fact that every man and woman is capable of praying, that is, of submitting oneself totally to God and of recognising oneself to be poor in front of him. All authentic prayer, "each one in his own identity and in search for the truth," is under the influence of the Spirit. "We can indeed maintain that every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person" [11].³⁴

4.3 The Universal Mission of the Holy Spirit

The significance given to the universal mission of the Holy Spirit has been an important feature of the magisterium of John Paul II.³⁵ Actually, it may well be said that his unique contribution to a theology of religions and to the question of interreligious dialogue is "the emphasis with which he affirms the operative presence of the Spirit of God in the religious life of non-Christians and the religious traditions to which they belong."³⁶

³³ Cf. Jacques DUPUIS, Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 175.

³⁴ This teaching has since been recalled on several occasions. See DP nos. 28-29, and in particular Pope John Paul II's General Audience on 9 Sept. 1998 ("Seeds of Truth are found in other religions"). The complete text of this catechesis, which was the 16th in the series on the Holy Spirit, is given in Appendix I.

³⁵ He is not the first however to do so. According to St Irenaeus, the gift of the heavenly Spirit was sent "into the whole of the earth" and the Spirit had been "poured out in these latter days on the whole of mankind." *Adv. Haer.* III. 11, 8-9, quoted in Yves CONGAR, I Believe in the Holy Spirit, vol. 2, Lord and Giver of Life (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 219. Medieval theologians often quoted a maxim of Ambrosiaster: "All truth, no matter where it comes from, is from the Holy Spirit." *PL* 17. 245, quoted in CONGAR, Lord and Giver of Life, 219. Speaking of the Spirit's activity, Pope Leo the Great said: "When the Holy Spirit filled the Lord's disciples on the day of Pentecost, this was not the first exercise of his role but an extension of his bounty, because the patriarchs, priests, and all the holy men of the previous ages were nourished by the same sanctifying Spirit." *Sermon 76, PL* 54, 405-406, quoted in AG 4, footnote 5.

³⁶ DUPUIS, Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism, 173.

Already his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, presents "the firm belief" of other believers as an "effect of the Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body" (RH 6). This universal action of the Spirit allows us to see the various religions as "so many reflections of the one truth." They are distinct paths to a single goal: "though the routes taken may be different, there is but one single goal to which is directed the deepest aspiration of the human spirit as expressed in its quest for God" (RH 11). The Church therefore respects "everything that has been brought about ... by the Spirit, which 'blows where he wills' (Jn 3:8)" (RH 12).

Dominum et Vivificantem refers explicitly to the universal action of the Spirit before the time of the Christian economy and, today, outside the Church. Before the Christian economy, the Spirit's action was directed toward Christ. Outside the Church today, that action results from the saving event carried out in Christ. Grace therefore has a christological content (grace is always the grace of Christ) and a pneumatological dimension (grace reaches human beings through the Spirit's action, both inside and outside the Church):

We need to go further back [than the birth of Christ] to embrace the whole of the action of the Holy Spirit even before Christ – from the beginning, throughout the world, and especially in the economy of the Old Covenant. For this action has been exercised, in every place and in every time, indeed in every individual, according to the eternal plan of salvation, whereby this action was to be... linked with the mystery of the Incarnation and redemption, which in its turn exercised its influence on those who believed in the future coming of Christ ... Grace, therefore, bears within itself both a Christological aspect and a pneumatological one, which becomes evident above all in those who expressly accept Christ (DetV 53).

The Pope sees the Spirit's action in the world right from the beginning of creation. Indeed this action has been exercised "in every place and in every time, indeed in every individual." This is quite a remarkable statement, the implications of which have not yet perhaps been fully understood. The Pope develops it in *Redemptoris Missio*. Here he reiterates that the Spirit's presence and activity are "universal, limited neither by space nor time." Concretely, the Spirit is "at the very source of humanity's existential and religious questioning" and at work not only in individual persons but in the religious traditions themselves:

The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity in its journey through history (RM 28).

5. CONCLUSION

Vatican II had unambiguously affirmed the activity of the Holy Spirit beyond the boundaries of the Church (AG 4; GS 11, 22, 26, 28). The Council, however, did not state explicitly that the Spirit is active in the world's religious traditions. It acknowledged nevertheless that these traditions contain "seeds of the Word" (AG 11) and that they reflect "a ray of that truth that enlightens all men" (NA 2). John Paul II has taken a step forward in recognising that indeed it is the Spirit "who continually sows the seeds of truth among all peoples, their religions, cultures and philosophies."³⁷ Authentic prayer, human values, the wisdom hidden in the religious traditions – are all fruits of the active presence of the Spirit. "Awareness that the Spirit of God works wherever he wills stops us from making hasty and dangerous judgements, because it evokes appreciation of what lies hidden in the hearts of others."³⁸

Other believers may think it presumptuous to see what they consider to be most precious in their traditions attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit. One should not forget however that the Pope is engaged in *Christian* theological reflection, not attempting a universal theology. And so, even if other believers do not share the most central Christian beliefs, "they may be able to accept that this particular language with a universalistic thrust can provide a sound basis for a respectful and fraternal attitude."³⁹

³⁷ JOHN PAUL II. Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, New Delhi, 6 Nov. 1999, no. 15. Text in Pro Dialogo Bulletin 103 (2000) no. 1: 27-47.

³⁸ JOHN PAUL II, "Address to the Interreligious Assembly". Vatican City, 28 Oct. 1999, Pro Dialogo Bulletin 103 (2000) no. 1: 9.

³⁹ FITZGERALD, "Pope John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue", 219.

CHAPTER IV

CAN WE PRAY TOGETHER?

THE PRACTICE OF INTERRELIGIOUS PRAYER

Participation in interreligious prayer is not an optional activity restricted to an elite group, but an urgent call for a growing number of Christians today, and should be a matter of concern for all Christians.

Whatever the situation, the key to authentic interreligious prayer is a sense of being rooted in one's own tradition and an openness to the working of the Spirit in other traditions.

Findings of an Exploratory Consultation on Interreligious Prayer,
Bangalore, July 1996.

1. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON INTERRELIGIOUS PRAYER

The growing practice of interreligious encounter in its different forms has led many of the participants to a desire for praying together. This is in itself a good thing: "One should rejoice that believers want to raise their minds to God to praise Him, to thank Him, to ask pardon for human offences and to make supplications."¹ When this occurs spontaneously, there is no great theological difficulty. Organised interreligious prayer, however, raises some questions:

Prayer depends on faith and points to it. To the extent that people believe the same thing, they can offer the same prayer. *Legem credenti lex statuat supplicandi* is a hallowed theological truth. Would an organised interreligious prayer not fall into the error of syncretistic irenicism?²

Two preliminary remarks are in order. First, if we are to achieve an authentic encounter in prayer, there has to be prior theological study. We must reflect first on what unites us and what divides us, and on the particular meaning of prayer in each religious tradition. Secondly, as Joseph Stamer points out, there can be no single response to the question of common prayer. Situations and socio-cultural contexts are so different that "what seems possible and even demanded in one place may be totally inappropriate in another."³

1.1 A Change of Attitude

Before Vatican II, an event such as the Assisi Day of Prayer would have seemed scandalous. The 1917 Code of Canon Law explicitly forbade what is technically known as *communicatio in sacris*

¹ Francis ARINZE, "The Engagement of the Catholic Church in Interreligious Dialogue since Assisi 1986," Pro Dialogo Bulletin 95 (1997) no. 2: 209.

² ARINZE, "The Engagement of the Catholic Church", 209. Some of the theological questions which interreligious prayer raises are: What does it mean to say that God is one? Are we all praying to the one and same God, though our images and understandings of God are different? If our language participates in the reality that it names, are we not dealing with a plurality of Gods? Can interreligious prayer be considered as prayer to God? Does it enhance the spiritual life of Christians? Can prayer be a corporate response to God's initiative, if we have different stories of God's mighty acts?

³ Joseph STAMER, "Can Christians and Muslims pray together?," Encounter: Documents for Muslim-Christian Understanding (March 1998) no. 243: 3.

– a communication in sacred worship. Active participation with non-Catholic worshippers, whether formal or material, was forbidden.⁴ The commentators gave several reasons for this prohibition:

Such communications with non-Catholics in their services involves a threat of perversion to Catholics or at least the danger that they will gradually become indifferent in religious belief; Catholics who observe it may take scandal from it; and non-Catholics may see in it a quasi-approbation of their services or of their erroneous belief.⁵

Though not mentioned by the old Code, the active and public participation of non-Catholics in Catholic worship was likewise forbidden, "since it would promote indifferentism through the impression given that there is no essential difference between the Catholic faith and the errors of the sects."⁶

We cannot dismiss out of hand the warnings of past theologians because they were well-intentioned and dictated by the desire to give glory to God alone. Actually, through the centuries, many religions have seen their prayer and worship as a private space not open to outsiders. If one emphasises the conceptual content of prayer, *communicatio in sacris* appears to be indeed impossible. To the extent that prayer is a confession of faith, we cannot borrow the formulations of other faiths. However, if one pays more attention to the experiential content of prayer, then some

⁴ "It is illicit for Catholics to assist actively or to take part in sacred worship of non-Catholics" (Can. 1258 § 1). Active co-operation with non-Catholic worshippers could be formal if it were done with the intention of really taking part in the worship; and merely material if it were done without that intention but for some other reason, e.g., civility or friendship.

⁵ John A. ABBO and Jerome D. HANNAN, The Sacred Canons: A Concise Presentation of the Current Disciplinary Norms of the Church, vol. 2 (St. Louis: B. Herder Book, 1960), 512. A passive or merely material presence could be allowed for *non-religious reasons* such as considerations of civil courtesy, duty, or respect, provided that in case of doubt the sufficiency of the reason be approved by the Bishop and that there be no danger of either perversion or scandal (cf. Can. 1258 § 2).

⁶ ABBO and HANNAN, The Sacred Canons, 513. The New Code of Canon Law (1983) raises the question of *communicatio in sacris* in Can. 1365: "One who is guilty of prohibited participation in religious rites is to be punished with a just penalty." Although the Second Vatican Council changed many perspectives, there is still a "prohibited participation in religious rites." This refers, commentators explain, to the Church's opposition to practices that go contrary to its very nature as the Church of Christ. Cf. CANON LAW SOCIETY OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND, The Canon Law, Letter & Spirit: A Practical Guide to the Code of Canon Law (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 786.

sort of communion in prayer becomes possible. A Christian participant at the Assisi Day describes his experience as follows:

It was evident that the Christians who attended the prayers said in front of St Francis' basilica were not just watching and listening respectfully! All of us were deeply engaged in one and the same movement beseeching for peace.⁷

The positive experience of Christians who pray with believers of other traditions constitutes today a main stimulus for theology.⁸ *Lex orandi, lex credenti* is a theological truth that works both ways. In the past, the practice of prayer and worship often directed our theological reflection.⁹ If so, we need perhaps to increase our involvement in common prayer and eventually our theology will find ways to explain our lived experience. In doing so we are following Vatican II's invitation to reconsider the attitude of the Church towards other religions and reflect "on what men have in common and what tends to promote fellowship among them" (NA 1).

⁷ DE BÉTHUNE, Pierre F., "The Bond of Peace: A few Theological Reflections about Interreligious Prayer." *Pro Dialogo Bulletin* 98 (1998) no. 2: 163.

⁸ Since the mid 1990's the Office for Interreligious Relations of the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue of the Vatican have been engaged in common reflection on the question of interreligious prayer. Following a preliminary exploratory survey, a joint consultation on the subject was convened in Bangalore, India, in July 1996. Participants representing different Christian traditions shared their experiences and understandings of interreligious prayer. Following the Bangalore consultation, a second consultation was convened in Bose, Italy, in September 1997, drawing upon theological expertise from Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox perspectives. This group was charged with formulating conclusions on the basis of the earlier research and findings, together with the further theological reflection that the group itself engaged in. The findings of these consultations can be found in *Pro Dialogo Bulletin* 98 (1998) no. 2: 231-243. Cf. also Gavin D'COSTA, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), esp. chap. 5: Praying Together to the Triune God? Is Interreligious Prayer Like Marital Infidelity?; S. Wesley ARIARAJAH, *Not Without My Neighbor: Issues in Interfaith Relations* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1999), esp. chap. 3: Dialogue and Spirituality: Can We Pray Together?

⁹ "That the church's *lex orandi* influenced patristic explanations of sacraments and theological terms is demonstrated in the pre-baptismal catecheses and the post-baptismal mystagogic catecheses of Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia ... That the liturgy continued to function in the medieval period as a theological source... is clear in the writings of Peter Lombard and Thomas Aquinas." Kevin W. IRWIN, "Liturgical theology" in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. by Peter E. Fink (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 722.

1.2 Phenomenology of Interreligious Prayer

In our pluralistic world, concrete situations of daily life provide opportunities for encounter of people from different faiths: neighbourly visits, personal friendship, praying together for a common cause, schools assemblies, etc. Sometimes a common misfortune brings people together. Other times, working together on a social project leads to a desire to pray together. There are also the religious feasts of the different communities. In some countries, national life has a religious dimension and major events are celebrated with common prayer.

Besides this variety of occasions, there is also diversity in forms of prayer among people of different faiths. Sometimes the members of a community practice spiritual hospitality, assisting at the worship of another community either out of friendship or in virtue of civic functions. Such attendance is always by invitation and respectful presence is recommended, that is, attentiveness to the symbolic expression of other religious communities. Spiritual hospitality, however, is not an occasion of genuine prayer in common.

Multi-religious prayer presents in serial fashion the prayer of different traditions (the Assisi model). While representatives of one faith community are praying, the other participants listen in reverent silence. The advantage is that the integrity and rich variety of each tradition is honoured. The disadvantage is that one may remain a mere bystander without entering into the spirituality of the other. United interreligious prayer instead is a service planned by different religious traditions and which all can claim as their own. The advantage is that it allows all present to pray together. Many possibilities arise when there is a genuine effort to pray in common: readings, meditation, shared commentaries on a text of scripture, prayers of praise, thanksgiving and petition, hymns, recitation of poetry, etc. However, since it may be difficult to find expressions of prayer which will be acceptable to all, the danger here would be to reduce prayer to the lowest common denominator and take away the uniqueness and richness of each religion.¹⁰

¹⁰ No hard line can be drawn between these two types of interreligious prayer. Multi-religious prayer may contain moments when all participants are united together in some response or symbolic action, while united interreligious prayer may allow for specific contributions from particular faith communities.

Silence appears to many as the best form of common prayer, an expression of the inability to truly share God's space in prayer. Silence is possible in all contexts, even in situations of conflict when words could be inadequate. Silence, it is said, opens up a deeper level of dialogue: it leads to a meeting of persons in their innermost being and hence to a profound sense of unity. To be sure, shared silence does not seem to raise the thorny theological problems of interreligious prayer. But one should also remember that common prayer is meant to be lived and expressed in words that can be heard and understood and, in principle, shared by all.

1.3 The Motivations of Interreligious Prayer

Why should we wish to participate in interreligious prayer? Is it out of a desire for something new or exotic, the result of a false irenicism? Are we trying to be "nice" to people and afraid of being prophetic? Or is it hoping that such practice will promote better understanding and mutual advancement among believers of different faiths? Most importantly, can interreligious prayer be seen as an expression of our faithfulness to the Gospel itself?

Hospitality as a Paradigm for Interreligious Encounter¹¹

One first solid theological basis for sharing prayer is that Jesus himself urges us to offer as well as to receive hospitality from others. When Jesus sends his disciples to announce the Kingdom he asks them to rely on the hospitality of their hosts (cf. Lk 10:7). Likewise, Paul recommends hospitality to the Christians at Rome: "Extend hospitality to strangers... Rejoice with those who

¹¹ Cf. DE BETHUNE, P., Par la Foi et l'Hospitalité. Essais sur la Rencontre des Religions (Clerlande: Publications de Saint-André, 1997). Reviewing this work, Michael Fitzgerald writes: "Hospitality is shown to be an appropriate paradigm for interreligious encounter. It is something dear to all cultures and religions ... Hospitality is not just a matter of words exchanged – as *dialogue* could perhaps be understood to be – but denotes a basic attitude which needs to be translated into action. The material goods offered and received are a symbol for a deeper interior sharing. So it is that the host who receives the guest, receives also *from* the guest. According to the Hebrew Scriptures (Abraham at the oak of Mamre), taken up by the Christian tradition, but also found in other religious traditions, the stranger is a sacrament of the divine presence." Pro Dialogo Bulletin 97 (1998) no. 1: 134. See also: Etienne RENAUD, "Living One's Faith in a Pluralistic Context." Encounter: Documents for Muslim-Christian Understanding, 261 (January 2000).

rejoice, weep with those who weep..." (Rom 12:13-20). Hospitality evokes within an individual a sense of identity and a feeling of being at home. Hospitality however is an exchange: one must not begin to offer before one has received.¹² Welcoming the other is in itself already good news. The many occasions that we are given today to meet peoples of other cultures and religions are a chance to rediscover this aspect of Christ's teaching:

"We cannot limit ourselves to receiving from them food and drink; we must also receive what is most precious to them: their means of communing with God."¹³

The Basic Unity of Humanity

Another basis for interreligious prayer is the basic unity of the whole human race.¹⁴ Over and above our religious differences, humanity's common origin and destiny and our shared ethical concerns should be seen as sufficient grounds for coming together to pray. Some people ask whether interreligious prayer is about worshipping together or merely seeking social harmony. Today, however, religions appear as the great disturbers of world peace: Northern Ireland, Nigeria, Sudan, India, etc. Religions are misused to provide a basis for claims, to sharpen oppositions and to demonise opponents. If common prayer helps to build trust between the religions against prejudices and resistance, then "merely seeking social harmony" seems to be enough reason to try.¹⁵

¹² "Giving is *not* the prerogative or duty of one party while receiving is proper only to the other; both giving and receiving characterise each party in an ongoing relationship. Are we [missionaries], then, as attentive to our social duty as receivers as we are to our perceived moral obligation as givers? There is just as much of a moral obligation to be a receiver as there is to be a giver – perhaps more, since to receive is to allow the giver the initiative, and it empowers or liberates the giver for a relationship." Anthony J. GITTINS, Gifts and Strangers: Meeting the Challenge of Inculturation (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989), 104-105.

¹³ DE BÉTHUNE, "The Bond of Peace", 161.

¹⁴ Cf. Russel J. CHANDRAN, "Theological Assessment on Interreligious Prayer," Pro Dialogo Bulletin 98 (1998) no. 2: 204.

¹⁵ "Prayer," Mahatma Gandhi said, "is the greatest binding force, making for the solidarity and oneness of the human family. If a person realises his unity with God through prayer, he will look upon everybody as himself. There will be no high, no low, no narrow provincialisms or petty rivalries." Quoted in COMMISSION FOR DIALOGUE AND ECUMENISM (Catholic Bishops' Conference of India), Guidelines for Inter-religious Dialogue (New Delhi: C.B.C.I Centre, 1989), no. 82.

Journeying Together with the Spirit

The most solid theological ground for sharing prayer with believers of other faiths however is the realisation that the Spirit of God is at work in their religious experience. Acknowledging this inescapable truth leads us to see interreligious dialogue – and particularly interreligious prayer – as "a journeying together with the Spirit to discover his path and the direction of his grace."¹⁶

2. A SUBSTITUTE FOR CHRISTIAN WORSHIP?

Have we exhausted the riches of the Gospel that we now turn to other religions for spiritual nourishment? Participation in interreligious prayer is not a sign of insufficiency in the Christian prayer tradition. On the contrary, experience shows that those who are engaged in interreligious prayer are strengthened in their own Christian faith. Participation in common prayer does not imply any compromise in the convictions of those committed to different faiths. It should be clear that interreligious prayer is "neither intended to create a new religion nor to be a substitute for the regular pattern of a particular faith community."¹⁷ Occasions of common prayer often take place at the level of the lowest common denominator and cannot, therefore, be a substitute for full Christian worship, or for the worship of any tradition for that matter.

For us Christians, in Jesus Christ – God's decisive Word to the world – all former covenants are brought to fulfilment and all forms of religious expression are brought to perfection (cf. Col 1; Eph 1-2; Heb 1:1-4).¹⁸ Consequently, even when judging positively the genuine expressions of other religious traditions, these will not be sufficient for a Christian. It will always be necessary for Christians to nourish their life of faith with the Gospel and the living tradition of the Church. It also

¹⁶ FEDERATION OF 'THE ASIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCES, What the Spirit is Saying to the Churches. Pastoral and Theological Orientations, 1998, no. 5. Extract in Pro Dialogo Bulletin 103 (2000) no. 1: 61-64.

¹⁷ "Findings of an Exploratory Consultation on Interreligious Prayer: Final Statement", Pro Dialogo Bulletin 98 (1998) no. 2: 232.

¹⁸ "All the aspirations which the prayer of other religions expresses are fulfilled in the reality of Christianity beyond all measure, without the personal self or the nature of a creature being dissolved or disappearing into the sea of the Absolute. 'God is love' (1 Jn 4:8). This profoundly Christian affirmation can reconcile perfect union with the otherness existing between lover and loved." Christian Meditation, no. 15.

means that Christians participating in interreligious prayer will present to others their characteristic form of prayer inspired by Jesus Christ.¹⁹ The Christian has the opportunity of offering to the other the possibility of experimenting in an existential way with the values of the Gospel. Our participation in common prayer expresses our desire to overcome mutual prejudices and to promote the life that Jesus brings to the world.

2.1 The Limits of Interreligious Prayer

The practice of hospitality also carries limits, both for the host and for the guest. The guest can expect to be welcomed, but cannot demand to be taken into the intimacy of the host's house. There are expected and accepted limits within which authentic engagement can nonetheless occur. Thus the non-baptised cannot participate in the Eucharistic communion,²⁰ as non-Hindus are not allowed inside Hindu temples and non-Muslims are excluded from Muslim ritual prayer.²¹ This reciprocal limitation is indeed painful, but it is part of the experience of hospitality, an expression of respect for the mystery of the other religion.

¹⁹ For St TERESA OF AVILA, the separation of the mystery of Christ from Christian prayer and meditation is always a form of "betrayal" (St Teresa of Jesus. *Vida* 22, 1-5). Cf. Christian Meditation, footnote no. 12.

²⁰ Adherents of other religions cannot be accepted as co-offerers of the Eucharist, for even if they have faith in God the fact remains that they do not, as a rule, have faith in the eucharistic mystery. The intimate connection between the eucharistic memorial and the Paschal Mystery means little or nothing to them; nor do they accept the doctrine of Christ's eucharistic presence. "To believe that in these circumstances he or she can still profit from communion would be tantamount to reducing the Eucharist to a sort of magic." Luis M. BERMEJO, Body Broken and Blood Shed: The Eucharist of the Risen Lord (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1998), 141. Similar reservations concerning direct participation in the official acts of worship of the other faith are expressed by Maurice BORRMANS in Guidelines for Dialogue between Christians and Muslims by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1990), 109.

²¹ David Brown, the late Bishop of Guildford, recorded this experience in the year before he died: "My distance from Islam came home to me in a sad but profound way one evening in Khartoum, when I went to the home of a Muslim religious leader. There were some 30 men sitting at ease in his courtyard and for an hour or more we enjoyed a good and open discussion about religious matters. Then the time came for the night prayer, and they formed ranks to say it together. I asked if I might stand with them, but the Shaikh told me I could not do so, since I did not have the right 'intention' (niyya). I had to remain standing at the edge of the courtyard." Quoted in COMMITTEE FOR RELATIONS WITH PEOPLES OF OTHER FAITHS, Can We Pray Together? Guidelines on Worship in a Multi-Faith Society (London: British Council of Churches, 1983), 1.

To understand this limitation, one must begin by recognising that prayer is not only personal experience but also a communal event. Prayer manifests and affirms a particular identity. It is related to the confession of faith that has drawn a group of persons together. Thus, it is understandable that there are reservations in all religious communities to participate actively in the worship of other faith communities or to freely accept outsiders in their own worship.²²

The GUIDELINES FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE published by the Indian Bishops' Commission for Dialogue and Ecumenism in 1989 distinguish between common prayer and participation in the official worship of another religion.²³ While "sympathetic presence and understanding respect" (101) that go beyond mere physical presence in the official worship of other believers is encouraged, the bishops warn against "the false syncretism of an active participation in what is specific and exclusive to other religions" [102]:

In strictly religious worship, active participation which means joining in the singing or prayers or adopting a posture of worship, will be reserved to the members of their religious group actually offering their worship [103].

By contrast, "sharing in prayer and contemplation" is encouraged [82], even when it involves the sharing by each group of their scriptures, prayers, gestures, and symbols, provided there is nothing magical or manipulative of the Divine Reality.

²² According to Amaladoss, official worship is as much expressive of the community as it is of the transcendent. The sacramental liturgy, for instance, actualises the Christian community as much as the Paschal Mystery. Baptism, for example, is not simply the spiritual rebirth of a person as a child of God, but this event takes the symbolic form of membership in the Christian community. The link between worship and community is further reinforced by the fact that the ritual celebration is always a re-enactment of that primordial manifestation of the Divinity which became the foundational event of a particular community. Baptism brings about a spiritual rebirth as a child of God by joining the person to Christ's death and resurrection. Cf. Michael AMALADOSS, Walking Together: The Practice of Inter-Religious Dialogue (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1992), 60-62.

²³ COMMISSION FOR DIALOGUE AND ECUENISM (Catholic Bishops' Conference of India), Guidelines for Inter-religious Dialogue (New Delhi: C.B.C.I Centre, 1989). The numbers in brackets after the quotations refer to the paragraphs of the text.

2.2 Fear of Syncretism

Syncretism is often invoked as a danger which threatens the authenticity of dialogue with people of other faiths.²⁴ Technically, the term syncretism refers to a fusion of different religious systems of meaning.²⁵ The possibilities and forms of syncretism multiply when contact comes about between cultures through migration, trade, colonisation, etc. In nearly all civilisations, we find such blending of native and foreign elements. Rites are taken over from one culture to another.

However, a certain ambiguity results from the fact that no clear line can be drawn between syncretism and the normal process of acculturation whereby a religious system integrates new cultural elements. Acculturation refers to the encounter between cultures. According to Shorter, inculturation necessarily presupposes acculturation:

This is because the Gospel cannot exist without a contingent cultural expression. If the Gospel is to make an impact through evangelisation on a non-Christian culture, it must arrive in an alien cultural form. The Gospel always comes from 'outside'.²⁶

Christianity, while frequently assimilating religious elements of the cultures that became Christian in the first centuries, has been hesitant to do the same with the cultures that it encountered later (e.g., the controversy about the Chinese rites²⁷). The official Christian position remained somehow open to cultural integration while refusing any religious compromise. This position, however, ignores the fact that religion does not exist apart from culture. On the contrary, religion is a cultural system. "It helps people construct their lives, using the symbols and concepts of their culture."²⁸ Religion operates in and through a culture:

²⁴ Cf. Francis ARINZE, Meeting Other Believers (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 1997), 24.

²⁵ Cf. John Charles MARALDO, "Syncretism" in Encyclopaedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi, ed. by Karl Rahner (Tumbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1975), 1657-1660.

²⁶ Aylward SHORTER, Toward a Theology of Inculturation (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988), 56.

²⁷ Cf. Mark R. FRANCIS, "Liturgical adaptation" in The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship, ed. by Peter E. Fink (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 19-20.

²⁸ Aylward SHORTER, Evangelization and Culture (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 38. For a fuller analysis of the fundamental link between religion and culture see SHORTER, Toward a Theology of Inculturation, 31-44. See also EXCURSUS on the idea of "inreligionation."

It is recognised that religion is the heart of all culture, as the last court of appeal on the question of meaning and as the fundamental structuring force. Hence the inculturation of faith cannot ignore the encounter with religions.²⁹

If that is so, two conclusions seem to be inescapable. First, the legitimacy that we recognise in other religious traditions must necessarily extend to their symbols and rituals, for religions do not operate in the abstract. Thus, we cannot condemn everything as aberration due to superstition and unbelief. Secondly, as the Indian Bishops point out with regard to common prayer, a distinction must be made between the "inner intention" of a prayer or symbol, that is, its ultimate significance, its last aim, and its "cultural or local wrapping":

Even if the external expression differs from the Christian faith and even if the prayers use names or symbols that derive from a particular religion, the Christian could internally and externally share in that prayer and worship by adhering to its inner intention, provided his or her participation does not imply... a surrender of faith in Jesus Christ and of membership in the Church.³⁰

Thus the religious symbols of other traditions should not be identified with the realities they symbolise. This distinction allows for a borrowing of images and conceptions from other cultures,³¹ even if some religious symbols have acquired a strong significance in a particular tradition which cannot be easily ignored. Two extremes therefore are to be avoided: on the one hand, to condemn everything as syncretistic and, on the other hand, to accept everything by ignoring the context and looking only at the deeper meaning. A careful discernment is always required. Syncretism can be a real danger in interreligious prayer when it does not respect the religious identity of the participants but presents them as members of one religious community of faith. Authentic encounter in prayer must be based on a mutual respect which allows for both unity of intention and diversity of symbolic and ritual expression. The real differences and unique dimensions of the prayer of each religious tradition must be upheld. Yet, some sense of greater wholeness may emerge nonetheless.

²⁹ INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, Christianity and the World Religions, no. 26.

³⁰ COMMISSION FOR DIALOGUE AND ECUMENISM, Guidelines for Inter-religious Dialogue, no. 84.

³¹ Cf. SHORTER, Toward a Theology of Inculturation, 57.

3. SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF INTERRELIGIOUS PRAYER

Those who live in multi-faith contexts know that there is a qualitative difference between religious plurality and religious pluralism.³² The fact that there are people of different faiths present in a given society (religious plurality) does not reveal the extent to which such faith communities have been accepted and integrated into that society (religious pluralism). The practice of interreligious prayer can be an important indication of religious pluralism. It testifies to the fact that relationships of trust have begun to develop.

Conversely, as prayer transforms our life, so common prayer should have a positive impact upon the life and relationships in our societies. Indeed, interreligious prayer is more meaningful where a close relationship exists between participants. We must always remember that the aim is not interreligious prayer per se, but the transformation of life, the reconciliation of human beings with God and with one another. Where common prayer is detached from our mission as believers to be an effective mediation of God's love, it becomes an esoteric ritual, robbed of its life-giving power. Prayer and mediation, "should flow into ethical action for justice and peace and never be a substitute for such action."³³

4. CONCLUSION

Interreligious prayer is a subject fraught with difficult theological questions, yet also a great challenge. The crux of the matter is our theological assessment of other religions, "whether we are willing to recognise their integrity of approach and their seriousness in prayer, and, therefore, suspend premature judgements about the structure, content and goal of an inter-faith service."³⁴ Interreligious prayer is grounded in our common humanity, our shared sense of hospitality, and the

³² On this distinction I follow Gerrie LUBBE, "Could the Practice of Interreligious Prayer Continue? How?," Pro Dialogo Bulletin 98 (1998) no. 2: 216-220.

³³ INTERRELIGIOUS ASSEMBLY. "Final Report". Vatican City, 25-28 Oct. 1999, Pro Dialogo Bulletin 103 (2000) no. 1: 13.

³⁴ COMMITTEE FOR RELATIONS WITH PEOPLES OF OTHER FAITHS. Can We Pray Together?, 16.

recognition of the working of the Spirit in the religious experience of other believers. "Rushing into inter-faith worship out of vague feelings of cordiality or denouncing it without examination as apostasy, are alike reprehensible."³⁵ Christians need to be discriminating in their participation in such events and, when they decide to participate, to do so in sensitive and appropriate ways. Common prayer is not a substitute for Christian worship, but it can give the Church a new vision of the greatness and glory of God and can strengthen us in welcoming, loving, and serving others in the spirit of him who died for all.

³⁵ Roy PAPE, foreword to Can We Pray Together?, iv.

CONCLUSION

LET EVERYTHING THAT BREATHES PRAISE THE LORD!

(Ps 150:6)

It is the Spirit that lies behind, beneath, and within all prayer. Indeed the cosmos itself is animated by God's Spirit, such that not only our groans but the groans of creation are the groans of the Spirit (Romans 8). The Spirit is the breath of the universe, a praying breath. And behind this lies a marvel we do not often consider: prayer is proper to God's own being ... Prayer is God's own proper activity, for God is a community and we are graciously made partakers of that community by the power of the Spirit. And it is this Spirit that breathes the possibility of prayer into the whole of creation. "Let all that breathes praise the Lord."

Paul Varo Martinson, *People Other Than Christians Pray*

THE QUESTION of common prayer is part of the larger effort for interreligious encounter. The most basic foundation for this encounter is the *universality of God's grace* and the varieties of ways through which human beings respond to God's grace. Our attitude to dialogue and the religious experience of our neighbours is deepened through the realisation that the *Spirit of God is at work* in them, "even if the Christian alone, guided by Christian revelation, can explicitly articulate this."¹ This conviction governs the Christian's attitude to the other:

Not only will the other's religious experience be perceived as deserving, in its very difference, of the highest esteem, but the Christian will also be convinced that in the encounter, through mutual exchange, there will be discovery of previously unknown movements of the Spirit.²

True dialogue eventually leads to a desire to turn together toward God. The various objections to interreligious prayer are serious. However, when one accepts that all authentic prayer originates in a reality that transcends the person who prays – namely, in the Spirit of God, those objections appear as essentially superficial and temporary. It is on the basis of this truth that Christians can move beyond their legitimate hesitations to share their experience of the living God in common prayer with other believers.

In the early period of interreligious engagement, participants either prayed separately or prayed in silence. Today praying together is becoming a regular practice at such meetings. For some it is a wonderful means by which to start a process of dialogue. Another opinion is that interreligious prayer represents an advanced stage in interfaith relations. Be that as it may, the fact remains that believers are never more truly themselves than when they are at prayer. So dialogue which stops short of exposure to the other person's prayer, is not open to all that the partners in dialogue have to say about themselves and their experience of the Transcendent. Common prayer transforms interreligious dialogue into a religious experience, leading us to acknowledge the presence of the sacred in the religious experience of the other. Therefore, as long as dialogue cannot be realised at

¹ Jacques DUPUIS, "The Spirit, basis for interreligious dialogue," *Theological Digest* vol. 46 (1999), no. 1: 31.

² DUPUIS, "The Spirit, basis for interreligious dialogue", 31.

this level it remains superficial, because the encounter has not yet taken place at the most essential level.

No doubt the road to mutual knowledge and acceptance is long and full of obstacles, but common prayer can help us transcend our perceived incompatibilities in the enunciations of faith. Such prayer will purify the hearts of the participants and help them overcome fixed and rigid positions by placing God and the search for his will at the core of dialogue:

Through prayer and meditation we open ourselves to the divine and to one another. We also develop inner resources for self-control, for mind-transforming experience so as to overcome emotional wounds and preconceived ideas. This spiritual healing can also lead to reconciliation of peoples that will wipe out revenge, a spiritual malaise. Prayer and meditation help to bring to the surface transcendental values which can be shared. They overcome enmity and are a source of peace.³

Attempts to bring about common prayer cannot be imposed and we cannot expect everyone to have the same answer to the question of interreligious prayer. Our best guess is that such prayer will come about of itself once believers are prepared to walk together in full awareness of their respective riches and weaknesses. We finish with an experience of Fr Christian de Chergé, the late prior of the Trappist community of Our Lady of Atlas in Algeria:

The first time a Sufi community of the neighbourhood asked to meet us – it was Christmas 1979 – its spokesman had been careful to make it precise because it was for sharing prayer they wanted to meet us. 'We do not want, he said, to engage in a theological dialogue with you, for it has often raised barriers which are man made. Now we feel called by God to unity. So we have to let God invent something new between us. This can be done only through prayer.' You will say, 'this is an exceptional case!' Perhaps, but this experience exists, and it is not an isolated case.⁴

³ INTERRELIGIOUS ASSEMBLY, "Final Report", Vatican City, 25-28 Oct. 1999. Pro Dialogo Bulletin 103 (2000) no. 1: 13.

⁴ Quoted in DE BÉTHUNE, Pierre F., "The Bond of Peace: A few Theological Reflections about Interreligious Prayer." Pro Dialogo Bulletin 98 (1998) no. 2: 164-165.

Kindle within us all the fire of your love.
Carry upon your wings the prayer of all men and women
who long for the truth to set us free.

O come, Spirit of God,
walk with us along the paths of life,
embrace us all with the friendship of your love.
Take away barriers that divide us
and make us pray together in spirit and in truth.

O come, Spirit of God,
draw all peoples together
and bring us into the mystery of your life.
Teach us through the prayers of others
that you are God and no-one else.
Enable us together to praise your name for evermore.

AMEN.

APPENDIX

SEEDS OF TRUTH ARE FOUND IN OTHER RELIGIONS

POPE JOHN PAUL II, *General Audience*, 9 September 1998.

1. In *Nostra aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, the Second Vatican Council teaches that "the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men" (*Nostra aetate*, n. 2).

Taking up the Council's teaching from the first Encyclical Letter of my Pontificate, I have wished to recall the ancient doctrine formulated by the Fathers of the Church, which says that we must recognize "the seeds of the Word" present and active in the various religions (*Ad gentes*, n. 11; *Lumen gentium*, n. 17). This doctrine leads us to affirm that, though the routes taken may be different, "there is but a single goal to which is directed the deepest aspiration of the human spirit as expressed in its quest for God and also in its quest, through its tending towards God, for the full dimension of its humanity, or in other words, for the full meaning of human life" (*Redemptor hominis*, n. 11).

All authentic prayer is called forth by the Spirit

The "seeds of truth" present and active in the various religious traditions are a reflection of the unique Word of God, who "enlightens every man coming into world" (cf. Jn 1:9) and who became flesh in Christ Jesus (cf. Jn 1:14). They are together an "effect of the Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body" and which "blows where it wills" (Jn 3:8; cf. *Redemptor hominis*, nn. 6, 12). Keeping this doctrine in mind, the celebration of the Jubilee of the Year 2000 "will provide a great opportunity, especially in view of the events of recent decades, for interreligious dialogue" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 53). Even now, during this pneumatological year, it is fitting to pause and consider in what sense and in what ways the Holy Spirit is present in humanity's religious quest and in the various experiences and traditions that express it.

2. It must first be kept in mind that every quest of the human spirit for truth and goodness, and in the last analysis for God, is inspired by the Holy Spirit. The various religions arose precisely from this primordial human openness to God. At their origins we often find founders who, with the help of God's Spirit, achieved a deeper religious experience. Handed on to others, this experience took form in the doctrines, rites and precepts of the various religions.

In every authentic religious experience, the most characteristic expression is prayer. Because of the human spirit's constitutive openness to God's action of urging it to self-transcendence, we can hold that "every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person" (*Address to the Members of the Roman Curia*, 22 Dec. 1986, n. 11; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 5 Jan. 1987, p. 7).

We experienced an eloquent manifestation of this truth at the World Day of Prayer for Peace on 27 October 1986 in Assisi, and on other similar occasions of great spiritual intensity.

3. The Holy Spirit is not only present in other religions through authentic expressions of prayer. "The Spirit's presence and activity", as I wrote in the Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio*, "affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions" (n. 28).

Normally, "it will be in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions and by following the dictates of their own conscience that the members of other religions respond positively to God's invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognize or acknowledge him as their Saviour (cf. *Ad gentes*, nn. 3, 9, 11)" (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue – Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, Instruction *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 19 May 1991, n. 29; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 1 July 1991, p. III).

Indeed, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, "since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of coming into contact, in a way known to God, with the paschal mystery" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 22).

This possibility is achieved through sincere, inward adherence to the Truth, generous self-giving to one's neighbour and the search for the Absolute inspired by the Spirit of God. A ray of the

divine Wisdom is also shown through the fulfilment of the precepts and practices that conform to the moral law and to authentic religious sense. Precisely by virtue of the Spirit's presence and action, the good elements found in the various religions mysteriously prepare hearts to receive the full revelation of God in Christ.

May the Spirit of truth guide us in our dialogue

4. For the reasons mentioned here, the attitude of the Church and of individual Christians towards other religions is marked by sincere respect, profound sympathy and, when possible and appropriate, cordial collaboration. This does not mean forgetting that Jesus Christ is the one Mediator and Saviour of the human race. Nor does it mean lessening our missionary efforts, to which we are bound in obedience to the risen Lord's command: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19). The attitude of respect and dialogue is instead the proper recognition of the "seeds of the Word" and the "groanings of the Spirit". In this sense, far from opposing the proclamation of the Gospel, our attitude prepares it, as we await the times appointed by the Lord's mercy. "By dialogue we let God be present in our midst; for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we also open ourselves to God" (*Address to Members of Other Religions*, Madras, 5 Feb. 1986, n. 4; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 10 Feb. 1986, p. 14).

May the Spirit of truth and love, in view of the third millennium now close at hand, guide us on the paths of the proclamation of Jesus Christ and of the dialogue of peace and brotherhood with the followers of all religions!

L'Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English, no. 37 (16 Sep. 1998)

EXCURSUS

A FASCINATING CHALLENGE: INRELIGIONATION

It is acknowledged that every religion is always intrinsically an interpreted experience: the original religious experience had to be incarnated in the cultural elements of the persons and communities which lived that experience. The same principle applies to any subsequent religious experience. And so the term inculturation has become increasingly fashionable due to a growing conviction in the necessity of adapting the Christian message to each cultural environment. Inculturation refers to the "presentation and re-expression of the Gospel in forms and terms proper to a culture, processes which result in the reinterpretation of both, without being unfaithful to either."⁵ If we keep in mind that the "terms proper to a culture" always include a particular religious sensibility, then, besides inculturation one should also speak of inreligionation.⁶ In fact, it is often difficult to distinguish between the cultural and the religious perspective in a given phenomenon. This difficulty is further reinforced in non-secularised cultures, as it is the case in traditional African or Islamic societies.

The religious sensibility of a people is therefore the *habitat* or *environment* in which any new religious experience is incarnated and re-expressed:

If we take seriously the fact that God reveals himself in all traditions, then it follows that any other announcement that comes to them historically must be necessarily received *in and through their religious sensibility*. This sensibility can be perfected, or even modified, but this

⁵ Aylward SHORTER, *Evangelization and Culture* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 32.

⁶ The term *inreligionation* – built after the model of inculturation – has been proposed by the Spanish theologian Andrés TORRES QUEIRUGA. Cf. *El Diálogo de las Religiones* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1992), 34-36. See also by the same author "Inreligionación" in *A la Raíz: Búsqueda de un Lenguaje Común para el Verdadero Diálogo Interreligioso*. Ed. by Emilio Galindo (Madrid: Crislam, 1994), 167-182. The word itself sounds difficult to the English ear. However, this should not deter us from seeing the importance of what it aims to express.

means precisely that it remains. The new element is assimilated within the existing religious sensibility.⁷

With regard to the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, St Paul does not speak of substitution but of "grafting" (cf. Rom 11:16-24). The grafting metaphor comes from the practice among ancient horticulturalists of grafting a young wild olive branch onto an old olive tree that had been giving good fruit. The Gentile-Christians are the wild olive shoot grafted on to Israel.⁸ Paul nevertheless warns the Gentile Christians against any boasting: "remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you" (Rom 11:18).

Torres Queiruga believes that the same application can be made with respect to the relationship between Christianity and the other religious traditions of humankind. The arrival of Christianity is not a cancellation or a simple substitution but a grafting, through which the new religion profits from the sap of the old, from which it lives, while at the same time enriching it.

The story of Zohra, an Algerian woman who converted to Christianity, provides an interesting example of the dynamism between the new religion (Christianity) and the old (in this case Islam).⁹ She explains that although she was baptised when she was twenty-five, she did not cease to be a Muslim. Many expressed surprise and asked how she could be a Muslim and a Christian at the same time. Within her Christian faith, Zohra retained a certain sensitivity and spirituality of the transcendent, which she owed to her Muslim upbringing:

For me, spreading the mat before prayer and making the ablutions are marks of respect which I absolutely need. Your easy-going manners in church make me uncomfortable. Knowing that God is near, that he came among us, does not mean that we should lose sight of his transcendence.¹⁰

⁷ Andrés TORRES QUEIRUGA, *El Diálogo de las Religiones*, 35 (our translation).

⁸ Cf. Joseph A. FITZMYER, "The Letter to the Romans" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. by R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, and R. E. Murphy (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), 861.

⁹ Cf. Jean-Marie GAUDEL, *Called from Islam to Christ: Why Muslims Become Christians* (Crowborough: Monarch Books, 1999), 120-121.

¹⁰ A. SEVE, "Zohra, Musulmane Chrétienne," *La Croix* (1-2 Jan. 1988): 13, quoted by Gaudel, *Called from Islam to Christ*, 121.

Zohra's experience proves that it is possible to retain one's original religious culture while fully living the Christian faith. Islam, as they live it, is not a body of doctrine in opposition to Christian doctrine, but a movement towards God which finds its fulfilment in Christ. From the experience of Zohra and other converts who felt called to become Christians while retaining their Islamic culture, Gaudel emphasises that:

A distinction thus emerges between Islam as a faith, some of whose beliefs may be incompatible with Christian belief, and Islam as a culture, which the Church can adopt, as she can adopt any culture, in order to live the Christian faith in a new fashion.¹¹

The experience of a small Christian community living among the Muslim Fulani in the north of Mali is an interesting example of how the Christian faith can be lived "in a new fashion":

We pray in a large straw hut, in every way resembling those of our neighbours and built by them. This would seem to 'signify' something for us, but also for them, just as do the postures we adopt in prayer. Inspiration for these has been drawn to a great extent from the postures of Islamic prayers. We have adopted them, not out of mimicry, but so that our prayer may really be perceived for what it is. We are never disturbed when we pray with bare feet, our faces turned towards the rising sun which Christ is for us, and prostrating, our heads touching the ground, during the doxologies. Quiet recently, when we were on safari and had made a halt near a family of nomads, their confidence was gained only after they had seen us praying the dawn office in this manner.¹²

We noted earlier the fact that Muslims today have difficulties in recognising the prayer of Christians for what it is. Probably that was the reason why this Christian community in Mali felt the need of a special place of worship in keeping with their Islamic milieu. They also adopted the custom of praying barefoot with its symbolism of separation from worldly affairs. Fitzgerald reports that other Christian communities, taking into consideration their Islamic environments, are opting for giving more room to corporal expression.¹³

¹¹ GAUDEI, *Called from Islam to Christ*, 121.

¹² G. JANSSENS, "Chez les Peuls," *Spiritus* 58 (1975): 83, quoted in Michael FITZGERALD and Robert CASPAR Robert, *Signs of Dialogue: Christian Encounter with Muslims* (Zamboanga City: Silsilah Publications, 1992), 131-132.

¹³ The *rak'a* (deep bow) replaces the genuflexion; hands are raised palms upwards (the attitude of Muslims in supplication) during the recitation of the Lord's prayer; the *sujud* (prostration) is performed during the

The inculturation of the gospel and of Christian spirituality in cultures that had been shaped by Islam poses "a specially fascinating challenge to Christians" according to Michael Nazir-Ali, the Anglican bishop of Rochester and formerly General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society.¹⁴

Christians should take inculturation seriously not only at the level of translating the Scriptures and other Christian literature, but in forms of worship, posture at prayer, liturgical terminology, spiritual exercises, and other related matters.¹⁵

In other words, bishop Nazir-Ali is advocating a true inreligionation of Christianity within Islam, a process which can enrich enormously the Christian faith – particularly in the area of spirituality.

Actually, what we are calling inreligionation is nothing else but the deepest level of inculturation. Religion does not exist apart from culture. On the contrary, religion "helps people construct their lives, using the symbols and concepts of their culture."¹⁶ The expression and mediation of the gospel in terms of a particular culture therefore requires extended dialogue with the people of that culture. Such a dialogue needs to be primarily focused on their spiritual tradition, and the way in which they make sense of the world. This includes paying more attention to their tradition of prayer. Even while trying to bring the good news of Jesus Christ, we do not want to eradicate the forms of worship and understanding that have sustained other peoples over the centuries. God calls everyone from the beginning. There has been no human being who was not born sheltered by God's revelation and unconditional love, "indeed he is not far from each one of us" (Act 17:27).

doxologies, or after the consecration at the Eucharist. Other features of Islamic worship which might also have a beneficial influence on Christian worship are the generally sober character of religious architecture which encourages concentration. There is also the stress on the need for ritual purity which can serve as a reminder that in worship there is a passage from the profane to the sacred. Cf. FITZGERALD, Signs of Dialogue, 135-140.

¹⁴ Michael NAZIR-ALI, Mission and Dialogue: Proclaiming the Gospel Afresh in Every Age (London: SPCK, 1995), 99.

¹⁵ NAZIR-ALI, Mission and Dialogue, 100.

¹⁶ SHORTER, Evangelization and Culture, 38.

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