

Fostering Human Dignity through Prayer

This paper seeks to explore prayer as a universal expression of human dignity. It will do so by considering the role Hans Urs von Balthasar sees prayer playing in the relationship between God and humanity in his book *Prayer*. The particular focus here is on the creation of men and women in the image of God, *imago Dei*, and the relationship this signifies with God, and particularly the Incarnate Word. In Him, we see not only the life given over to continuous relationship with God—serving at all times—but also the recapitulation of humanity in God’s image from which human beings receive and rightly understand human dignity. Living out this relationship, which is most fully achieved through prayer, and, more specifically still, through contemplation, becomes a universal vocation, the goal of life, fulfilling humanity’s role within creation. To begin it is important to define the terms and scope of this question in order to proceed to a satisfactory conclusion. First, it will be helpful to answer what we mean by prayer, what Balthasar is talking about when he uses the word prayer, and whether those are in fact different. Second, this clarification will lead to a discussion of the Incarnation and the roots prayer has in this phenomena, what is meant by human dignity, and what this has to do with prayer. Finally, the discussion will just begin the turn to the application of these first two points in the praxis of prayer. This is ultimately a discussion of a spiritual practice, and, therefore, as much as it can be described the activity of contemplation is left to the reader’s own exploration.

When most think about prayer a very similar scene likely comes to mind: someone sitting quietly on their own, softly or silently reciting words in petition to God. This seems the most generic, typical example of prayer. It is something with which everyone, no matter how

relatively or peripherally, is familiar—even if it isn’t something they themselves practice. It is, therefore, necessary to reimagine what prayer is in order to get at why it is so important. In his book on prayer, Balthasar states from the very start, “Prayer is something more than an exterior act performed out of a sense of duty.”¹ Limiting prayer to act makes it a purely obligatory or transactional habit. This leaves absolutely no place for a relationship between God and the individual in prayer. The exterior action is strictly something offered: something taken from within oneself and placed before God without any exchange or reciprocation. Balthasar then asks if the occasion arose in which one had “...a pressing need to converse with God otherwise than in stereotyped formulas, how many know how to do so? It is as if they had to speak in a language whose rules they had never learnt.”² Put simply, there is so much more at stake in prayer than what these exterior acts allow one to grasp. By limiting the perception of prayer to these stereotyped formulas human beings are closing their eyes to the true depth of relationship extended to humanity in the form of prayer.

The most fundamental step to reimagining prayer as a relationship is removing it from the notion of being an act of talking at God. “Prayer is a dialogue, not a monologue recited by men in God’s presence.”³ There is a necessary exchange of ideas, of conversation and mutuality that the performance of prayer perverts. Even in its most solitary forms and instances, such as among hermits living completely apart from all others, their praying is not something they do alone. All prayer is a conversation, not just an act performed. “Indeed there is really no such thing as

¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. A. V. Littledale, New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961, 11.

² Balthasar, 11.

³ Balthasar, 12.

solitary speech; speech is essentially mutual.”⁴ But how does humanity share in this relationship with God? How is it that dialogue is expressed? “Prayer is an exchange between God and the soul, and...in this exchange, a definite language is used, obviously that of God himself.”⁵ The language and activity of prayer must originate in God. If it originated in humanity then it would either be something human beings created on their own apart from God’s will that would then have no impact upon the divine being, making it both meaningless babble and in fact sinful, or it would violate God’s impassibility by making demands and obligations upon Him that He did not will. It would be something humanity created and then used to establish a relationship with God. Human beings would in that way be creating their own relationship with God, not participating in the relationship extended to them.

If prayers to God do not therefore violate the divine impassibility, then they must be fitting to the relationship between God and humanity and have their source in Him. This connection to God in prayer, this special relationship possessed by humanity, has its source in the relationship existing between God and human beings as a result of their creation in the image of God. In praying to God, they are expressing the dignity fitting to human beings as *imago Dei*. This comes both by virtue of the fact that human beings were created to pray to God and that the Word of God exists as part of humanity. In this, the question of what the language of God is and how it is made available receives its answer. If language is the means by which God chooses to communicate Himself, then the language of God comes from the Word of God, who is God’s expression of Himself. “We cannot contemplate God apart from the ways leading to him, that

⁴ Balthasar, 12.

⁵ Balthasar, 12.

reveal him to us, by which he reveals himself and gives us access to him.”⁶ “What we have to do is, first, listen to God’s word and then, through that word, learn how to answer.”⁷ If language of God is expressing the Word, by conversing in the language of God human beings are necessarily engaging with the Word.

In general discussion of the Incarnation of the Word focuses on the salvific impact of the phenomena and deals explicitly with what human beings were saved from—namely, death. In grounding dignity in the relationship possessed by humanity with God as *imago Dei*, however, one can also talk about what human beings are saved for and in this sense explore both why Christ became part of the human race and what is offered to humanity as a consequence. Balthasar echoes Irenaeus of Lyons in identifying this action as recapitulation; literally, Christ re-heads the human race in His Incarnation and restores us to the image of God. “God’s Word, as spoken to us, presupposes a Word of God within us, inasmuch as we have been created in the Word and can never be separated from our centre.”⁸ Human dignity comes from creation in the image of God and it is restored and elevated through the Incarnation. This elevation does not mark a change in God but in humanity and its capacity for relation with Him.

It is important to note then that the kind of prayer Balthasar is talking about is contemplation. This relationship and the expression of dignity are not confined to an individual’s capacity to petition God or express gratitude. These are both actions open to all of creation. What is special in human beings and gives them dignity is the capacity to contemplate God Himself.

⁶ Balthasar, 125.

⁷ Balthasar, 12.

⁸ Balthasar, 22.

Because this dialogue of prayer is occurring on God's terms and in His language, the encounter is not something one can understand. No one can contain or possess knowledge of what is encountered. It is simply something, in Balthasar's phrasing, that human beings can view. "This looking to God is contemplation. It is an inward gaze into the depths of the soul and, for that very reason, beyond the soul to God. The more the soul finds God, the more it forgets itself and yet finds itself in God."⁹ Contemplation is an engaging with the Word in prayer, which is only something individuals can do because they share in His image and He shares in their humanity.

The impact of the Word on prayer is not simply that of a moral guide or example. Christ does provide this for humanity, and it is, to some extent, involved in the relationship with Him. In contemplation, however, one goes beyond learning how to lead a good life and encounters the divinity of Christ. "If we were unable to 'understand' the human side, the incomprehensible element would not strike us with such force, and there would be no starting point for contemplation of the divine aspect."¹⁰ Christ surpasses this educational role by virtue of His being the Word of God who became flesh, and therefore the revelation of God. It is "Through faith we are able to contemplate the divine in what is created."¹¹ This marks an elevation in contemplation, as the revelation extended in Christ's Incarnation becomes the central focus of all prayer. "Our contemplation is a groping approach to the mystery of the hypostatic union," which itself, "...is expressly a self-manifestation, an exterior utterance, an explication and a

⁹ Balthasar, 20.

¹⁰ Balthasar, 131.

¹¹ Balthasar, 131.

presentation of the eternal Being to beings in time.”¹² Responding to this revelation in prayer marks the fulfillment of human dignity by bearing witness to the Incarnation.

In making the decision to pray, human beings are accepting God’s gift to all of humanity, made through their very nature, to participate in a relationship with Him. “What do we do, when at prayer, but speak to God who long ago revealed himself to man in a word? The better we learn to pray, the more we are convinced that our halting utterance to God is but an answer to God’s speech to us.”¹³ Contemplation is the willed acknowledgment and celebration of another by its nature as dialogue. It is the participation in the strength of another in the use of God’s own language. And it is the desire and pursuit of that which is beyond our capacity for reception: contemplation. “The feeling of helplessness which overwhelms us when God makes his appearance in Christ is something that comes only from an ever-deepening humility and renunciation, a more complete simplicity, nudity, and poverty.”¹⁴ Prayer is therefore an inherently humble action that, in denying the individual will, expresses the fullness of human dignity by celebrating its relationship and life in God.

¹² Balthasar, 127.

¹³ Balthasar, 12.

¹⁴ Balthasar, 130.