

Prayer of praise

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285 cm high - Philipsburg (young boy playing the flute, detail)

Words of Spirituality

by ENZO BIANCHI

Those who love God with all their heart, and their neighbor as themselves, want to give praise

Christian prayer takes place between the two poles of lament and praise. It is particularly difficult, I find, to speak about the prayer of praise. It reaches us burdened with a judgment of excellence compared to other forms of prayer, a judgment formulated repeatedly by the Christian tradition on the basis of its supposed purity, disinterest and gratuitous nature. I find the logic that generates comparisons and judgments of superiority and inferiority inappropriate here, and I think that praise, precisely because it is gratuitous, can be better understood if we remember that prayer is essentially relationship and dialogue. Praise and request compliment each other in prayer, and it is their polarity and complimentarity that make the relationship that is prayer balanced and authentic. Prayer is not simply a series of demands (which it would be if it were exclusively request), nor is it flattery (which it would be if it were exclusively praise). It is a real (and not ideal) encounter that takes place between a human being and God, within history and in the concreteness of daily life. In prayer, God makes himself present in a human life by revealing the wonders of his love and inspiring the response of praise; at other times, he conceals himself behind the enigmas of suffering, death, and distress, provoking a request, lament, or supplication. In human interpersonal relationships praise is the language that expresses acceptance and a positive view of another person - it is the language usually used by lovers. In prayer, we might call praise love answering love. We respond to the love of God that we have recognized in the events of our life with praise, acknowledging the Other in the greatness of his works and gifts. Praise is always a response to the person of God, and not to his gifts: the prayer of praise is theocentric.

It is our 'amen,' our 'yes' to God and his actions, and it is a 'yes' that is total and unconditional. This is the praise Jesus himself offered: "I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and learned you have revealed them to the childlike. Yes, Father, such has been your gracious will" (Matthew 11:25-26). The Christian's praise repeats this movement, finding its catalyst in Christ: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God" (2 Corinthians 1:20). In the liturgy, the authoritative source of Christian prayer, the Easter season is marked by the constant repetition of the exclamation 'Alleluia' ('praise the Lord'). In this way the liturgy shows us that God's great gift is the Son himself, who died and rose again for the salvation of humanity. It is the saving action of the Triune God, fully revealed through the paschal event, that inspires the doxology, the praise of the church. This aspect of praise as an 'Amen' addressed to God, a confession of his alterity and presence, shows us how closely praise is related to belief: praise expresses the celebratory aspect of faith. It is significant that in the Bible, praise often springs from discernment, in faith, of an intervention of God in history. An example of this is the canticle of Moses, which follows his confession of God's intervention in leading the people of Israel out of Egypt (cf. Exodus 15). Rather than calling praise superior to supplication, we should place supplication under the overarching horizon of praise.

Supplication implies praise and evolves in the direction of praise. Its foundation is praise, since in supplication the believer confesses and invokes the Name of God, and recognizes that he or she cannot turn to anyone else except to the God who has abandoned him or her ("My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?", Psalm 22:2). It evolves toward praise because the one who prays hopes to see again the face of the Lord he or she knows and loves. This explains why the psalms of lament often end with an expression of praise (Psalms 22, 31, 69 etc.), and why the Psalmist, as he laments his exile or his distance from God, can still exclaim, "I shall again praise him" (Psalm 42:6,12; 43:5). This aspect of hope, of future praise, is particularly evident in the doxologies we find in the book of Revelation, which describe eternal life as filled with the praise of believers. What is affirmed here is a future relationship of presence in which there will no longer be any shadow to separate the believer from his or her God. If praise brings together in prayer the dimensions of faith, hope and love, it is clear that it is the substance of our life, the way we are called to live. We are destined to be "praise of God's glory" (Ephesians 1:14), and our life itself should become praise. Those who love God with all their heart, and their neighbor as themselves, want to give praise with all their heart by living and dying in God's presence. Significantly, the Christian tradition presents the martyr as an example of praise expressed in an entire life up until the very end, almost an 'amen' personified. The fundamental importance of praise in prayer explains why praise finds so many different linguistic forms of expression in our personal and community life. From song to whispered or murmured words, from joyful celebration to inner exultation, from words to silence: "Even silence praises you, O God" (Psalm 65:2). In silence, praise becomes the cor ad cor presence of beloved to Lover.

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