Authentic Identity is Prayerful Existence:

A Short Commentary

by *Glenn Crider*

This tape, carefully transcribed and edited by Brother Daniel Carrere, O.C.S.O., was recorded by Thomas Merton during the last years of his life while he was living as a hermit. In its simplicity it does many valuable things. Above all, Merton reminds his listener that prayer cannot be a project which we undertake. Prayer is, in fact, always initiated by the mystery of God's presence. Prayer is a call just as any vocation is a call. Such a call is not initiated by us as individuals. Rather, it is something an individual hears and to which that person responds. Merton reminds us that no baby is ever aware of its nature and therefore no newborn consciously seeks to act as a baby should act. The child simply *is*—and in being so, the actions of the child are not different than our own entering into all life and prayer. Merton's analogy is to breathing. We do not consciously seek to breathe. We just do this natural action. So, he insists, should our prayer-life be—something which comes as a most natural part of our life. There are things which can be done to inspire the conditions of breathing and there are different kinds of moments when our breathing is different; yet Merton implies the best we can do is to realize there is no one single formula for prayer. Circumstances allow each person to pray in different ways—sometimes liturgically, sometimes in awe and silence. "Successful" prayer is not something to be evaluated.

Prayer and Identity[1]

by *Thomas Merton*
(Transcript of a taped conference)

A few things on the life of prayer ... Do we know why we want to live lives of prayer? Are we praying in such a way that our prayer is simply for "something else"? It's all very well to pray for intentions, and to pray for the world, and to pray for health and all

those things; still, a life of prayer tends to be an end in itself. It is right for prayer to be an end in itself insofar as it is entirely centered on God, who is our end, if we can still use those terms—I suppose people still believe that God is our end, in the sense of the goal toward which we orient all our lives, or should orient all our lives.

As religious we still think of our religious life as a life given to God, consecrated to God, oriented to God; and it is in prayer that we are most dedicated, consecrated, and oriented to God. In prayer everything in us is, so to speak, centered on God. It is in prayer that we are most ourselves, that we are most what we want to be, what we hope to be, what we are called to be. But this can easily become very confused, especially if we have some sort of implicit, confused ideas about what our prayer is all about, or what God is all about, and what kind of a thing the religious life is all about. When we are mixed up on these points everything tends to get mixed-up, and prayer can become a very mixed up and frustrating thing when it should be quite simple.

Basically, prayer should be as simple as breathing, as simple as living, but when we make a great issue out of prayer it tends to become confusing; it tends to get distorted. It becomes a cause, the great "cause of prayer," and then it becomes opposed to something else which is not prayer. You get into this break: prayer is something sacred and other things are secular, and you have to keep them apart—and that's a confusion.

As breathing is neither sacred nor secular—you just breathe—so prayer too should be neither sacred nor secular. I don't regard prayer as a specifically sacred activity. It's *life;* it is our life; it comes from the very ground of our life. I think it becomes a sacred activity when it gets to be quite public and formal and so forth, but we should not divide prayer against the rest of our life, and we should not make prayer a cause for which we are willing to fight and have crusades, so to speak. The danger is that our religious life, our prayer, our apostolate—things like that—become causes which we make to serve ourselves. We use them, perhaps, out of a spirit of self-glorification.

Anyway, let's start with the basic proposition that we belong to God, and we want to belong to God, and we want to affirm our belonging to God. We want to live in a consciousness that we belong to him. The great thing in our life is this awareness of our identity as children of God: he is our Father and we live in this

constant relationship with him, with him from whom we come, to whom we return, to whom we belong. We belong to him most completely in prayer, and prayer should be the activity, therefore, in which we are most ourselves.

Right away we see that when prayer is not what it should be it becomes the activity when we're most *not* ourselves, when we're *least* ourselves. If we're not praying as we should, we are most artificial in prayer, and we feel that when we are praying we are phony in a certain sense; we're pretending. Of course, this is something we should at times feel because as soon as prayer becomes too much of a project, we do tend to pretend. Rather than praying, we pretend that we're praying. We discover some kind of a role, some part to play; we find some particular kind of prayer that we think we ought to furnish to God and we put ourselves in that role and try to act the part of somebody praying in that particular way. Well, then it's artificial, and one of the great curses of the life of prayer is that when it becomes a role (one learns how to play the part of a religious praying—I am so-and-so and I am praying—or worse still, the role of having a certain degree of prayer, which is all nonsense, and I put myself in that role and I play that) it gets to be very artificial.

This brings up the question of the understanding of ourselves, which is a big question today. Rightly or wrongly, whether we like it or not, we tend to be constantly questioning our understanding of ourselves and who we are, our vocation and whether we should stay or leave, whether we should consider ourselves this way or that way, whether we should look at ourselves from this or that point of view. We have a great variety of choices of identity offered to us today, and we tend to waver around which one are we going to be. We've got all these roles and we don't know which one we're supposed to be in. Well, if you don't know what role you're supposed to be in, you're having a hard time.

It isn't a question of a role; it's a question of a vocation. A vocation is not a role; it's not a part we play. It is a response to a personal call. God speaks and we answer. He doesn't give us a role; the function of being a child of God is not a part that we play; it's not a role. When a baby is born he doesn't start playing the role of baby. He doesn't know he's got a role to play—he hasn't.

This is a big problem. We are obsessed with this idea of understanding ourselves, and it's unavoidable that we are so, but we get that mixed up with prayer. We start trying to understand

ourselves in prayer. Prayer becomes a time devoted to self-understanding, evaluation of ourselves; how are we doing? Well, that's what it should not be. It gets to be that to some extent, but we have to try to avoid this because it's wasteful, frustrating, and it's not what we want to do; it's not what prayer's for.

On the contrary, prayer should help us abandon ourselves, to be *not* occupied with ourselves, and to attain to a kind of wholeness, a kind of all-round acceptance, which I would say is a very important fruit of prayer—an all-round acceptance: acceptance of ourselves, acceptance of the world as it is, acceptance of our religious life as it is, not as it *may* some day be or we hope it will be (we have to accept it as it is if we are going to make it what it is going to be); and we really have to accept other people. Prayer is the great way of getting ourselves opened up to this attitude of acceptance and availability and not lamenting our lot so much—just being in it, being with it, being all there, and being ourselves. At the same time, we do have to recognize the fallenness and ambiguity of our state, the fallenness and ambiguity of our love.

The natural material of our prayer is our love, our capacity to love, our human heart. It's most important that our human heart as a whole should function in prayer. In some of the ancient monastic traditions the first thing about prayer is the ability to find one's heart, to seek and find one's own heart, one's true voice to speak to God with and to listen to God with, a true *center*—and not to be ambiguous about this. The fallen state that we are in is that we're ambiguous about our own heart.

To be in a fallen state is to be in a state where one's heart is double, self-contradictory. Even though we're baptized, and even though we are nourished with the bread of life, we maintain this state of ambiguity in spite of ourselves, at least psychologically. We can't get out of it altogether; we have to be saints before we are through with that, and even the saints aren't through with it. We also have to accept this fallenness and ambiguity of our love and of our hearts.

We come to prayer with ambiguous hearts, and we have in ourselves the same doubts as other people to some extent. We are not safely walled off from the world in a little religious universe where everything is secure. Our faith is not secure in the modern world, not that the modern world attacks our faith but that we are simply modern people and therefore ambiguous, and therefore, we tend to doubt. We don't have the simple, direct faith that people

of another, less complicated, age were able to have, and we don't have to have that simple, direct faith. We are bound to have a certain element of doubt in our lives because we are ambiguous people, and it is simplicity to recognize this and not to pretend that we are totally out of it. Of course some are more simple and less complicated than others. You don't have a duty to be ambiguous. I'm not saying that your whole life has to become that of playing the role of an ambiguous, doubting person; but with the sincerity that we have in our own hearts, we must respond to God in prayer.

It is God who calls us to prayer. So prayer, first of all, is a response to a call from God, a personal call from God, and I think we should look at it that way even though we don't feel like praying. Let's admit that very often we don't feel like praying and that there are a lot of other things we'd rather do than pray.

God calls us to prayer, and he calls us to the particular kind of prayer that he wants of us. Some he calls to say the psalms; others he calls to a kind of loving attention to him; others he calls to biblical meditation on his word, deepening one's understanding of his word, one's identification with his love and loving will in his word. To learn how to pray is to learn how to respond to God's personal call to us to prayer, and of course the great place for learning this is in the public prayer of the Church, in the liturgy, and in the Bible.

Prayer is an inner awakening, the awakening of an inner self that God intends us to be and to have. It's an awakening of a God-intended self. Guardini has some good things on this in his book on Pascal.[2]

He talks about yielding to the call of God to prayer and the change that happens when one yields to this call and one answers God's call to come to prayer, which is a personal call that we have to listen for. Perhaps the beginning of all prayer (you aren't hit by a thunderbolt and immediately start praying) should be a certain amount of listening and praying that we may hear. When we begin the public prayer of the Church we say, "Lord, open Thou my lips"; well, let's perhaps think of our own meditative prayers as, "Lord, open my ears; open the ears of my heart so that I may hear you calling me to pray"—but the mere fact that I begin to pray is a call to prayer.

Guardini says that if the heart yields to the call, then something happens to it: for the first time appears the genuine center.

The *genuine* center, the counterpart of the divine center that is calling, for the first time awakens—the genuine God-intended self, the real self. So what we are aiming for in prayer—right now I'm talking especially of meditative prayer—is this awakening of a genuine center, an authentic personal center that is the counterpart to the divine center that is calling. They are both within us, and yet we don't find them by introspection. Introspection is usually not helpful for prayer.

In this opening up and acceptance of God's call in our genuine center, our depth, Guardini says, the mystery of that absolute initiative by which God reveals himself gives light, touches the bottom of the heart so effectively that it unbinds itself, opens, and recovers sight and freedom. So, a further development in our life of prayer is this interior opening up, this unbinding of the inner self at the touch of God, to recover sight and above all to recover freedom.

The *great* thing that we are all seeking today, especially in the Church, is this freedom of the sons of God, and there is no freedom of the sons of God without prayer. So when this unbinding of the inner self takes place and we are, so to speak, liberated—liberated for what?—liberated to go to God, liberated to have free access to God and free speech with God (*parrhesia*, confident free speech), to have access to God and speak to him face to face in the dark (so to speak), to speak to him as sons to a father with all confidence and without any fear. Without *any* fear, except of course that reverential fear that gives us a deep *respect* for God as infinite, incomprehensible Presence—and yet without fear.

God wishes us to speak to him without fear, even though we are sinners, with perfect loving confidence as his children. This is what he asks us to come to prayer for: that we may walk right up to him without fear and say, "You are my father; I love you," and whatever else we believe that he wishes us to say. It isn't just that he dictates to us things to say; what we say to him comes from our own heart. We can invent new things to say to him, if there are things to say, and we can say nothing; we can just listen. There are many things we can do in the creative and inventive situation that is our mutual understanding with God in prayer. He wishes to establish us in a relationship of mutual understanding, realizing that he understands us and we understand him. He understands us to some extent in a way that we can understand: we know that he has a father's understanding of us and we know what that is.

It's not purely a mysterious, totally incomprehensible dark night of the soul thing, except sometime it is.

All these things we can confidently keep in mind as realities of the world of prayer.

This opening to God is an opening also to everything else. The Presence of God, which is so mysterious and so real and so intimate, does not exclude anything else; it doesn't block out other things necessarily, although sometimes it seems to. It also opens us to embrace the whole of life, the whole of the world. It opens us to everyone and to everything, and we embrace everyone and everything in God.

Of course here we come to the problem of the new consciousness of modern man, which is such a great problem because it is our problem to a great extent.[3] We all have this problem of modern man for whom, as they say, God is dead. Of course that can mean all kinds of things. It may mean just that modern man is unable to conceive God in any way and remains inarticulate before him. [Then there is] the so-called self-withholding of God that somebody has spoken of: that modern man is inevitably in a position where God withholds himself from modern man. But is this true? This is no dogma of faith; this is no axiom. We know that God does not withhold himself; but people who are too influenced by what other people are saying are soon going to be running around saying God is simply inaccessible to any of us: what's the use of trying to pray, what's the use of anything like this; we must find God in some totally different way—because he withholds himself we have no access to him, and so forth. This is not true; it just simply is not true, and we as Christians realize that even though we may at times have moments of great dryness and desolation and so forth and so forth, it doesn't mean a thing. God does not withhold himself from his children. We have received his Spirit; we live in Christ. Does God withhold himself? He gives us the Body and Blood of his Son. What do you mean, withholds himself? We don't need feelings of consolation to realize that God gives himself.

To confuse God's giving of himself with feelings of consolation, that's—well, it's an old-time mistake; we know that's delusive. But we have to realize that God is an infinitely higher reality than we are, and when a higher reality meets a lower one, Guardini says, this occurs in such a way that the higher reality appears questionable from the point of view of the lower reality, so we instinc-

tively doubt God. It's understood that we *are* creatures of doubt, but doubt and faith in a certain way can coexist in the same person—not real theological doubt but *questioning*, self-questioning above all. We must not confuse our self-questioning with our questioning of God, our self-doubt with our doubt of God. We come to God in prayer with a great deal of doubt of ourselves, a great deal of doubt of our own authenticity, and we should because we're not totally authentic, but that should not become also a doubt of God.

Nevertheless, when we do come face to face with him we find that he is questionable from our point of view, until faith breaks through and, by his gift, that question is resolved: not by our figuring, not by our reasoning, not by our reading, and not by somebody else telling us, but simply by God resolving the difficulty.

On the other hand, if one consistently holds to a lower reality against a higher, one may develop a state of radical bad faith in which, constantly being suspicious of the higher reality, constantly questioning it and constantly rejecting it and pushing it away, there is formed a bad conscience. The doubt is suppressed and you get a doubt in another form now, the doubt that after all it may be something totally beyond us that is there and is speaking to us, and so forth, and we refuse to hear. This produces a state of resentment and a kind of inner bitterness and bad faith that we try to overcome with a sort of false liberty and resentment.

Sometimes this happens to a modern person, a person dominated by the way other people think, and by the way society thinks, and by the general agnosticism of the world in which we live, which is a normal thing today. You just can't avoid it; it's there. Dominated too much by this, we can't allow ourselves to really let go and believe, and yet we know somehow in us, in the depths of our being, something is calling us to believe; yet we can't do it. And so we hold back and then we're guilty about it and we accuse ourselves and then perhaps we are guilty and perhaps we don't believe.

The great thing is to get away from this preoccupation with ourselves, examining ourselves, examining our prayer, examining our good faith and our bad faith and our faith, and whether we believe and whether we don't believe, and whether God loves us and whether he doesn't love us—and all that stuff—and simply abandon our preoccupation with ourselves and let go, because

"He that would save his life must lose it, and he that would lose his life for my sake will save it,"[4] and that is the important thing.

Notes

1. Transcribed and edited by Ernest Daniel Carrere, O.C.S.O. The original and longer taped conference, generically titled "On Prayer" (no date), is available at the Thomas Merton Center of Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky. The tape was prepared by Merton for cloistered nuns in Louisville.

2. Romano Guardini, *Pascal for Our Time*, trans. Brian Thompson (New York: Herder and Herder), 1966.

3. See Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), part four.

4. Mt 16:25; Lk 9:24