

QUIET PRAYER AND THE APOSTOLATE

Full text of February 1949 editorial

Indifference... Attentiveness... No Christian would dare to profess openly a spirituality of *indifference*! And yet, how many flee from the building sites where the new world is being constructed... Fortunately, others are in favour of a policy of *attentiveness* – or rather: it is more than a policy; it is an *attitude of attentiveness*. They intend to give general interest priority over individual interest, to collaborate in the great human endeavours and give a Christian witness everywhere.

May I say, nevertheless, that those in favour of an *attitude of attentiveness* seem to me to be rather naïve and optimistic! Listening to them, it would seem that, if all Catholics imitated them, Christianity would soon reconquer the esteem of the world and its influence. In reality, in the past ten years, many Catholics who were formed in Youth Movements, have found themselves in important positions with political implications in their job, trade unions etc... They have often avoided the worst mistakes and have advocated and applied wise methods. But can we say that they have contributed a new, powerful and bold concept to the new world that is feeling its way? Can we say that, thanks to them, Catholicism has acquired more prestige? That, at a time of great distress, it has appeared to our contemporaries as the greatest hope?

Let us move on from the worldly sphere to that of the apostolate. For a number of years, activists have been working for the Kingdom of God in their particular environment. In many parishes, a liturgical renewal and a missionary concern have become apparent. However, do the results live up to expectations? Are they commensurate with the efforts put in? Who, today, would marvel, like the pagans of the early centuries, at the sight of Christian communities and say: “See how they love one another!”

Christians no longer appeal; they no longer arouse hatred; what is it due to?

It is all too simple and simplistic to blame our contemporaries and to declare that they are impervious to Christianity. It is really too easy to say purely and simply that our traditional pastoral ministry is out of date, that our methods of apostolate have failed and that we must find new ones. Without denying the element of truth in these statements, I believe that the trouble goes deeper. What, to me, seems to be lacking in the Christian community and its members is *vitality*: they are no longer filled with fire and passion.

For my part, I believe that the reason for this worrying anaemia lies in the disinclination of today’s Christians to pray and, more particularly, to the form of prayer, the intimate encounter with God, that is called *quiet or contemplative prayer*. Without it, the Word of God, the sacraments are, in a way, obstructed sources of unutilised energies.

- Because Christians do not draw divine energy through prayer, they flag in their action;
- because they do not contemplate the wonders of God, they lack courage;
- because they do not rise to the Lord’s thinking, they have only a short-sighted vision of the world’s problems;
- because they do not connect to the creative energy, they lack effectiveness.

In a word, when Christians do not practise *quiet prayer*, they remain, as it were, stuck in infancy.

I know, however, some men and women who do not hesitate to devote a significant time every day to *quiet prayer*. I have in mind that village craftsman who became a youth counsellor in his area and, in the past few years, the Christian leader for a whole region; or that young widow, mother of a family, who has taken on some heavy civic responsibilities; or that leader of industry who attributes to his morning meditation the change of atmosphere in his work committee ...and others besides. In all people of prayer, whose

evolution I have been able to follow, I have indeed observed a strengthening of personality, a great serenity, an outlook on problems that is both broader and more realistic, an increase in effectiveness – in a word, a growth in human and supernatural *vitality*. They do not, for all that, become perfect overnight; they are not miraculously freed of their faults and limitations. But, at last, they have COME OF AGE.

I would add that only they are *attentive* to the world – even if they are not called to assume great responsibilities in the Church and in society. “Our steps tread the street, but our heart beats in the whole world”, wrote the mother of a family. *Attentiveness* is, indeed, first and foremost spiritual in nature. Remember the story of Moses praying on the mountain whilst the Israelites are fighting in the plain (Exodus 17: 8-16). He is so *attentive* to the fight that, when he holds his hands raised to the Almighty, his soldiers are winning over the enemy; when his arms flag through tiredness, his men are, as it were, drained of energy and loose ground. As long as Christians are not first and foremost *attentive* to the world with this kind of *attentiveness*, they will only have a token role and not be true actors in the play.

I can hear you objecting: “We haven’t got time”. I’ll grant you that, if *quiet prayer* is a luxury, there can be no place for it in our lives over-laden with work and family tasks. But if praying is a vital necessity, like eating and sleeping, then that objection is absurd. Would not the doctor find it absurd for an anaemic person to claim that he/she has no time to eat? In reality, it is not time that is lacking, but faith. Were you convinced of the importance of prayer, you would find a quarter of an hour or half an hour a day for it. Among the evenings spent reading, working in the house, watching a film or visiting friends, you would not hesitate to put one aside to seek God. What you are also lacking is a sense of effort. Whereas you have spent years in the study of languages or science; whereas you spend considerable time, imagination and energy in developing your business, you give up as soon as it is a matter of becoming initiated in the highest human activity: prayer.

I must tell you in conclusion that it troubles me to have to plead with you the case for *quiet prayer*. Is it not shocking to have to give endless reasons for inviting the child to come to its father, open itself to his confidences, experience his intimacy, express its love and gratitude to him? ... What if this Father is God?