

Prayer

Giovanni Vanucci



Translated by Leslie Schroerlucke. M.M. Ed.
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Collana “Germogli” by Massimo Orlandi.

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Prayer is not
begging, but to
make our life more
intense.

Giovanni Vannucci

Giovanni Vannucci, born in Pistoia in 1913, Giovanni Vannucci spent his 71 years as a traveler toward the infinite, constantly seeking to raise questions and turn them upside down—just as a spade turns over a clod of earth—to make his land, and ours, more fertile.

A friar in the Order of the Servants of Mary, he was a scholar and teacher of biblical studies and the history of religions. A leading figure in the 1950s and 1960s during the Florentine spiritual renaissance alongside David Turoldo, Lorenzo Milani, and Ernesto Balducci, he experienced, like them, the fierce resistance of a Church that could not accept such an open outlook on the future.

In 1967, in a hidden corner of Chianti, he found his life's fulfillment: a hermitage where he could live and welcome everyone in a harmonious and free spirit, with a sincere and profound openness toward all religions.

On June 18, 1984, a heart attack brought him into direct contact with the God to whom he had turned to throughout his life. But it did not interrupt his journey on earth: precious fruits continue to spring from the seed of his ideas.

Presentation

On the edge of a country street, in a small rustic village between the hills and woods of Chianti, almost fifty years ago, a monk began to build the community of his dreams. While the world was agitated from the anxiety of social change, while protests of young people were exploding, this monk was looking to construct a small ark of silence, a bulwark and refuge from the deluge of words that threatened to make man lose sight of the deepest meaning of his presence on earth.

Pray. This word reaches me like a whisper from that small space, the hermitage of Stinche, where Giovanni Vannucci lived out a prophetic vision with simplicity and hospitality: to build an ark of silence in which to encounter ourselves—a vision that is even more necessary today, since the deluge of words has never ended; on the contrary, its intensity is a thousand times stronger.

“Between us and Christ there is a space of silence. And so we must go to him, perfumed with silence, immersing ourselves in this silence to reach Christ through this space of desert, of silence, of solitude, which is not earthly: it is a space of the soul.” This is what Father Giovanni said to draw those who listened to him closer to the immense and unexplored spaces of prayer.

And that is what he says to us in these meditations, which do not reveal to us the verbal content, forms, styles, or characteristics of prayer, but rather seek to probe us deeply regarding its necessity.

Pray. This verb, as spoken by Father Giovanni, has a different meaning from what we traditionally have in mind. For him, prayer does not consist of questions; rather, it is a “state,” a “condition” that is attained by journeying toward the deepest part of oneself.

On this journey, what matters most is seeking silence: silence is the very fabric of prayer, and its atmosphere. Only when a person has freed himself from his burdens, his turmoil, and the background noise of his own self and his surroundings can prayer truly begin.

For Father Giovanni, this journey in search of an unencumbered space—free from the vicissitudes of daily life—a space in which “the divine is no longer invoked but present”—can radically transform our lives: because prayer has the power, on the one

hand, to let us savor the unique melody we carry within, and on the other, to show us that this melody resonates in harmony with the universe.

For this reason, prayer restores us to our daily lives with a different, peaceful perspective, and with a beneficial sense of belonging to the whole. With joy in our hearts.

Let us, then, approach these pages not to deepen our knowledge of the times and ways of prayer, but to understand why prayer can constitute “man’s truest and most incisive activity.” Father Giovanni will not try to convince us. Rather, he will show us that it is not an easy path. But he will also help us feel the vastness of this word, “to pray”—the only one that can pierce, in everyday life, the veil of mystery that envelops the world.

Massimo Orlandi

Introduction

Set aside a moment of quiet reflection during your day—preferably in the morning—which is the best time—or in the evening, when nature grows still. There is also a time of total silence in nature, during the transition from light to darkness and vice versa. In these moments, try to be alone—totally alone, free from the waves emanating from your mental, emotional, and physical selves—and to feel like prayerful beings, in communion with the Holy Spirit.

Set aside your work plans, your hopes, and whatever awaits you during the day; forget everything, every connection to the world. At that moment, you must be alone.

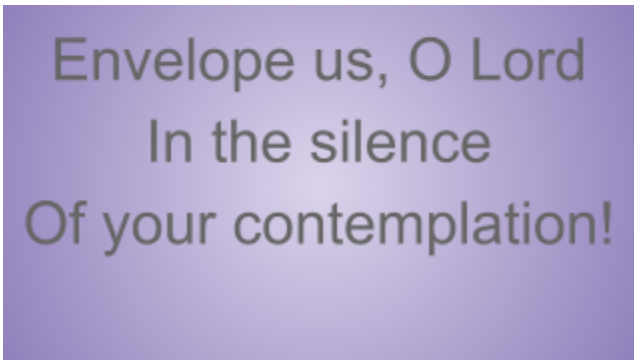
Imagine that this pause of total prayer is like the moment of death. When the moment of passing arrives, we will be alone—even if surrounded by people united with us in love—who fully participate in the great mystery that is about to be fulfilled.

We will be alone, alone before the eternal.

Such must be the moment of our prayer.*

Giovannio Vannucci

* Giovanni Vannucci, *Invitation to Prayer*, Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, Florence 1979.



Envelope us, O Lord
In the silence
Of your contemplation!

These and other prayers inserted in the book are from Father Giovanni Vannucci.



The Essence of Prayer

One day a novice went to an old monk in Egypt and asked him, “What is prayer?” And his response was: “Look at me!” and as he raised my hands, everything became bright, and waves of light emanated from his fingers, connecting this man with the whole universe, visible and invisible.

What is prayer? Prayer is the transfiguration of our being in the Truth. There are prayers that have value, but are not prayer. Prayer is when the totality of my being ascends in the truth of God: then my flesh rejoices, and I must take it into account, follow its guidance so that it does not become an obstacle to me, and neither I nor my ascent must be an obstacle to my flesh: for it is my whole being that must ascend!

This is very difficult, especially for us catholics who have been educated to a pessimistic and lacking vision, in a climate of widespread distrust toward the flesh and body.

When the text of the New Testament speaks of flesh, they don't mean sex at all: they mean the kind of man who centers his entire life around his own selfishness and refuses to look beyond himself. But the man that looks for God reconnects his entire being to his

inner source, which is the eternal, the God, author of life, creator of flesh and spirit and heart.

I think that for you young people it is less difficult than it has been for me to overcome this lack of vision. However you will overcome it!

What then is prayer?

In the specifics of prayer we see two vocabularies of which I will tell you something tonight: meditation and connection.¹

What do I mean by meditation?

Yesterday evening I mentioned something about meditation, when I told you that, according to Plino the Elder, "the branches of the tree mediate towards the East, towards the light."

What is it for us to meditate? To orient all of our being towards the Truth and towards the Light.

One could close himself in a grotto in the Himalayas, another could travel the world to find the Truth, and the Light, another could live an ordinary life, looking with all of his being for the Truth and the Light..... When in us is born a will of Light, a desire of Light, a will of Truth, all of our being pulses and orients itself towards a precise end that is at the center of our being: then is born concentration, our composure.

Describing it approximately according to our language, because for us the most complex thing that we talk about is our anthropology- we have a body, that is a physical body; we have an emotional center; we have a mental center; we have a volitional center. These four realities approximately constitute the structure of man and need to orient themselves around the center.

And where is the center? In us! And what is our living center?

Yesterday I spoke to you about the mystery of human existence and universal existence. We come from the invisible to the visible and our appearance in the visible realm has brought about no change in the invisible realm. What this means is that before we existed, we existed in the thought of God. Then the time for our incarnation arrived, and we set out. But what are we? The beginning of life, a spark of life that is born in the breast and mystery of God.

We have a name, our profound name, an essential one, not a name that we find on our ID card, or in the registry of our town or parish: our anagraphic name counts for nothing, what counts is our essential name, that has been thought of, that is at the origin of our existence, that has been pronounced and decided in the breast of our mother and around this name is organized all of our matter, all of our human reality.

The essential point is that each one of us has an eternal name.

¹*From a conference held at the Hermitage of Ronazano (Bologna) July 28 1982, and published as Prayer, Concentration, Meditation" in "Quaderno di Fraternita n 6, Eremo S Pietro alle Stinche.

Then, the focus is not to go towards high or low, but is meant to go down into the deep well of our interior to find the precious gem that we are, our truth, our essence, our divine spark.

When we will have met the precious pearl of our being or the little mustard seed- that is small, however it grows and transforms all men- then our prayers will assume the aspect of concentration.

My center is not the center of the Roman Forum or of the cathedral of the catholic church that is St. John in Lateran, but it is mine, my name, and by discovering my name, I also discover the names of others, and between me and others is then born an essential fabric that determines the spring of a new society. Here, for me, is the focus.

In our meditative structures, the center has also been incorporated into the architectural design. If you go to a Roman church and follow all the calculations that have determined the position of the various columns, the various arches, you notice that the church and the entire architectural complex are centered around a specific point: the point that connects the earth with the sky, l'axis mundi, the axis of the world, as the ancients called it and as historians of religion still call it.

This was a religious language symbolic for pushing man to find the divine center in himself, non in a notion or in a theory, in a theology, but vitally: the living center of our being that makes each of you what you are in the Truth and in essentiality, that living center of your being that disturbs you, that makes you suffer, often throwing you into failures. Why? Because it wants to grow in you!

How do we find it, this center?

There is a great Indian mystic, a saint of our time, Raman Maharshi, who based his entire teaching and personal ascetic practice on the question: "Who am I?" And he began by talking to himself: "Am I my body?" He had experienced death; he had gone through the process of laying his body to rest, and he felt that something within him did not die. And then he said: "That is not me!"

"Am I my will?" But if we change our will a hundred times a day, then we are not our will!

"Am I my thoughts"? But neither our thoughts are us: how often our thoughts change!

However there is something in us that remains, this something of permanence is true, our divinity, a radiant spark that has descended into our flesh and longs to resurface in existence. This blossoming of the essential and luminous part of our being is our singular task in our existence, in which we cannot fail without betraying both ourselves and others. Each one of us is called to sing a song, and if this song is not given, the

harmony of the universe is altered. Each of us is called to give a vibration to existence and, if we deny this contribution to existence, we alter all of existence.

Then: we discover through concentration who we are!

Does it not seem to you that in us there is a metaphysical suffering? And so we wander, drifting until we find the meaning of our own lives. And when we make mistakes, we suffer like hell. Don't you think so?

When we set out on this quest, nothing that men tell us makes any sense. Men say: "If you want to find yourself, get up at 6:00 am!" I get up at 6:00 am and remain the same man, and even understand that I must stop my exterior activity by 9:00 p.m.

Everyone has his moment, when we walk decisively towards the realization of our essence, towards the manifestation of our essential name, then we feel that all the principles of man are good... but for those that formulated them!

"You can't force a nightingale to sing during the day; a lark sings in the blazing sun... If you were to write a treatise on birds: 'How beautiful it is when, in the middle of the afternoon, all the birds—from birds of prey to non-predatory birds—singing their hymn to the sun. "No, sir!" The little owl, the barn owl, and the scops owl sing all night long... When we set off toward the realization of ourselves, towards the rise in the true divinity of our being, we listen to what other people have to say, but in the end we go our own way.

Doesn't it seem this way? You see, this is the essence of Christianity!

Christ has not given general directions, but has always spoken concretely: to the young ruler, obsessed with wealth, he said "Renounce everything you have, and follow me!" (and from this we have established some general principles); he doesn't tell Zaccheus to renounce, but "Today I will come to eat with you": this man is so joyful that he comes to terms with his dishonest past and says to him, "Sir, I give up now; I will return what I have stolen..." (he must have really meant it!) of Zacchaeus something else was asked.

So in following Christ, we cannot formulate general principles. Each one has his path, each one of us must find his path, illuminated by the presence of Christ who accompanies us in our personal journey. This is very difficult!

Have you ever asked yourself why the sacrament that, through the rite that perpetuates the presence of Christ is made up of wheat bread and grape wine? Why? Because wheat is an element of the sun that contains a major quantity of silicon compared to the other elements, and this determines in us the full awareness of our rational and conscious self. People who eat rice are drawn more to dreams, because rice is a plant

of the moon. People that feed on corn develop different mental dispositions. Wheat is a solar plant, because our “I” must reach full awareness of itself.

And so it is with the wine, that together with the sun but also the moon, is the fruit of Dionysus. Wine also induces a state of clear consciousness and pure rationality in the brains of those who drink it (although drinking too much produces the opposite effect...) It brings certain parts of our brain to a standstill, and this pause then leads to greater mental clarity. The “I Am” of Christ is linked to the sacrament of bread and wine.

Let’s move on. The East is the religion of *breath*, the great research of breath, and of control of the breath, all very important things.

In the West, Christianity instead is the religion of digestion.

Don’t be shocked by this discussion. You go to the table, we have all eaten the same bread, but have you digested it in the same way? Each of us breaks down the macrocells of the bread we eat according to our own biological, physical, psychological, and mental makeup; and after breaking down this “perfect cathedral”—which is the macrocells of bread—we build another “cathedral” in accordance with our own being.

That means that each of us must eat the body of Christ and drink the blood of Christ and live it personally. We must not as Christians be put in a line and made to march to the sound of a drum.... Each of us has his step, he has his own personal capacity to assimilate Christ. This is a realization of our personal responsibility.

In fact, each saint is different from the other, and no one can imitate a saint. I must live Christ like Saint Francis saw Christ, like our first Fathers have seen Christ, how the first fathers have seen the mystery of Christ, but I cannot imitate neither Saint Francis or my founders: I must live Christ according to my “stomach,” according to my capacity to assimilate the celestial bread that is Christ.

The transformation of our being in the reality of Christ, if it is also a personal transformation, is the great fruit of prayer.

I think this: *prayer is equal to transfiguration*. For us the center of life is Christ, but Christ, who has expressed himself in us through the eternal, essential part of our being. So we all live Christ, but in a different and personal way! The nun lives Christ as the married woman does; the young woman who dreams of married life lives Christ as the young woman who dreams of the Poor Clares’ monastery does: each according to her own truth, according to her essential calling.

Concentration consists in going deep within ourselves and understanding what God is asking of us in our present life and living it personally. We will discover that our self is a

particle of the Self of Christ, and by living my personal self to the fullest, I manifest an aspect—however small, however minimal—of the reality of Christ. So too, you and all people, by living the small light you have received, by living it intensely and being transfigured by this light, will one day recompose the face of the Son of Man and the Son of God. For me this is prayer.

Meditation is orienting our being towards the Truth, towards the Light. Concentrating to the depths of this longing for Light, descending into ourselves and discovering within us that trace of Light that God has caused to descend into our flesh and blood. From this concentration in us are born religious men and women, with exquisitely personal manifestation, in a way that my light is not the light of any of you, the light of each of you is not my light, but our little lights put together a grand flame in the reality of Christ.

Have you ever thought of these things?

Every man that comes into existence has an invisible Light: when this invisible light is manifested, a luminous star meets the other light; and when our lights meet each other, it creates an even more vast illumination. In this illumination everything becomes transfigured, our flesh, our body, our blood, our bones, our eyes, our words, our gestures: everything is transfigured!

Father,
Expand our
consciousness
Increase our love!
Give us the certainty
that each creature
each flower of the
field
Each sparrow
Will appear on the
day of meeting
Of all of the
generations
Because the joy
Of all creation
Is perfect.



The Form of Prayer²

One of the attitudes that we must constantly have in our life is the presence to ourselves: reaching a state that makes us permanently conscious of what is happening in our human dimension considered in totality: physically, mentally, emotionally. We believe we are conscious, but we often can't remember at night what we did during the day. The distractions are not acts of genius, but simply forgetting, an absence to ourselves. In order to really pray and become human creatures of prayer we have to train ourselves to be present to ourselves, and to have mastery of our thoughts; until we have achieved this master of thought, we cannot be men and women of prayer.

² From June 1-3 1972 brother Giovanni invited the sisters of the Congregation of the Servants of Mary to Ravenna, to hold conversations on the theme of prayer. With some small editorial modifications the text has been transcribed from the recording and has been published in "Fraternita" serie n. 14-Gennai-Guigno 2008.

The second place that we need to master is in our emotions. Our feelings change all of the time, and we cannot be people of contemplation while we have a volcanic eruption of our emotions: it is necessary to pay attention and make continual corrections. In our emotions there are positive and negative feelings: feelings of sympathy, positive, feelings of dislike, negative, a feeling of courage is positive, a feeling of fear is negative, a feeling of security is positive, a feeling of frustration is negative, as well as the negative feelings of being misunderstood, unencouraged, or victims of injustice, etc.

Now, we should have the maximum cure that all of our emotions are positive, otherwise some negative ones give birth in our being that impede our being men of prayer. There is a part of our emotions that we must correct because we cannot reach the joy of contemplating God while we carry the weight of our shadow. In order to reach a state of prayer, we must succeed to surpass the negative feelings that develop little by little in life and deposit themselves in our conscience. A child does not feel this way: give a child a slap, and soon afterward he's back to normal and has forgotten all about it; but if you adults suffer a similar insult, it stays with you for life unless you possess a strong sensitivity and emotional depth capable of overcoming such trivial moments. When the Lord says, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Mt. 5:39), he is urging us to see the positive aspects of life.

Third point: gain insight into and awareness of the underlying motivations behind our actions; also those motivations that seem more generous and more altruistic, many times contain the bug of selfishness. It is very important to be sincere with ourselves: as long as we are not clear with ourselves we cannot pretend to hear a form of prayer because many times also in the search for prayer there can be the root of the desire to reach a holiness that attracts the admiration of men, or there can be a desire for power, for singularity, of being different from others. This is no longer the pure pursuit of prayer, but a self-serving pursuit that stems from selfishness from which we have not yet freed ourselves.

Sincerity means having a clear understanding of oneself, not to be confused with the "right intention." What is the right intention? One says: When we direct our actions toward a good purpose, this would be the right intention. This finalization is our act of will, but we must always be wary of ourselves, because the root of our will many times is our desires, our tastes that aren't always easy to admit. Our will can be rooted in inner immaturity or in inner clarity. Thinking, "I'm doing this for the love of God," is not the same as having the right intention.

I believe that true and righteous action, in the religious sense, is the one performed simply because it must be done—and it is the action that completely overwhelms us, that fully engages our whole being. And as we perform this action, we feel that we are

doing what God asks of us: one day we must go to the cross and allow ourselves to be nailed there calmly; another day we must ascend to the papal throne. "Right intention" strikes me as a very subtle device often used to justify the unjustifiable: ambition can never have a right intention; it always has a root that springs from one's own selfishness.

We must know ourselves: such awareness requires great courage. In us there are so many parts of our being that we do not want to know because we have fear of seeing our face, and we perceive reality through the particular construct of what we call a mask. We create a version of ourselves and often act it out. It is very difficult to be ourselves, it requires continual attention and clear courage with ourselves. We should be able to master our thoughts, for by controlling them we can attain that state of stillness that fosters contemplation. Then our actions and our presence in life would truly be effective, in the sense that we would bear witness to the values of the Spirit: not to convert souls, but to be spiritual presences that bring to people a maturity cultivated in the Spirit. But unfortunately, these things don't exist, so each of us must laboriously forge our own personal path.

To learn to pray, the true form of prayer, a certain time occurs: it is all of the man that must ascend, not only the mind and the heart, but all of our human being must be transfigured. Our flesh will also be transfigured like the flesh of Christ, our body will be transmuted like the body of Christ and our mind, our emotions and our will will be transfigured in the reality of the Spirit that Christ brought. Everything in the universe, after Christ, is moving towards transfiguration. The religious man, who must live with intensity, with generosity greater than those with an ordinary religious commitment, need not to rush things. In the fourth gospel there is no distinction between present and future time, but everything happens from the ground up: "The time has come when the dead will be raised to life" (John 5:21). We must succeed to rise again, to glorify our flesh, all of our personal being, to be able to live in the truth and in the exactness of prayer. People come to the monastery to ask us this: more than bread to satisfy their hunger, they ask us how to pray.

How will we pray? Each of us has his path. We have community prayer, and it is right that this is habitual and attended by all the members of the community, because each one must bring his maturity to the prayer community, his song, his note. But because communal prayer has the intensity to transform it requires that each one goes to communal prayer having had long moments of personal prayer. God, when he speaks of prayer, does not say this to us: "Sing the Psalms together!" but he does say "Close yourself in your room and pray in silence, so that no one sees you and knows that in this moment of solitary prayer the Father that is in heaven sees you" (Mt 6:6). We must do this to then give life, strength and truth to the prayers we make together.

We have already seen how our solitary prayer must be animated by three things: presence to ourselves, positive emotions, knowledge of the profound motivations for our actions (or sincerity with ourselves), but above all, the constant presence to ourselves. In other words, we should seek that in prayer, all of our being is in peace. How do we put ourselves in peace? Our physical being must be in peace. We must have, while praying, a comfortable position for all of our physical parts, our flesh, and during prayer it is in a state of perfect relaxation and of perfect peace. Each one finds his position. Ordinarily, for westerners, it is enough to put ourselves on a little stool, not very high. We must pay attention that our dorsal spine is erect. It is better to do this without leaning against a wall, whoever can't do it and leans against the wall can sit without impeding the regular circulation of the blood, without becoming rigid or momentarily paralyzing some muscle. The feet are better to be joined, because one closes the circulation of the hands by putting them together on the womb, together, or with the palms supported on the knees. This is an ancient prayer position.

Once we succeed in finding our position, which permits us to completely pacify our body into a state of perfect relaxation, we must think about breathing. I do not say anything new: in the *Rules of the English Recluse* there is a paragraph where he speaks of prayer in the name of Jesus, in which each invocation must be interrupted by a particular form of breathing. The ancients knew this. One needs to restudy gregorian chant: certainly the oldest Kyrie are sung to regulate the breath.

How must we breathe?

Let's try this (Once learned, we will acquire a spontaneous rhythm):

3 pulsations to inhale

3 pulsations to stop without breath

3 pulsations fo exhale

And we do it again: inhale, pause, exhale.

Or we can choose the rhythm 5-3-5, or 7-5-7.

This will return us to a great pacification, above all it will help us - if we follow with attention this form of breathing- to liberate us from our thoughts and feelings, because we will be attentive to our physical being, to the rhythm of our blood, to the rhythm of our pulmonary system. We hurry and do not encourage ourselves. It is written: In patientia vestra possidebitis animas vestras (Luke 21:19) While breathing, mentally pronounce the phrases indicated in the plan that follows. All this to learn to breathe peacefully, rhythmically and consciously.

Summary Plan for Breathing Applied to Prayer

Rhythm

3+3+3 Rapid

5+3+5 Slow

7+5+7 Slow

Observe your breathing without hurrying, without violence. Breathing becomes conscious.

The scope of this exercise is the conscious experience of breathing in the body.

When you inhale slowly, say "I inhale slowly."

When you exhale slowly, say "I exhale slowly."

When you inhale rapidly say "I inhale rapidly."

When you exhale rapidly, say "I exhale rapidly."

To be conscious of your body:

Inhaling: "I inhale feeling my whole body."

Exhaling: "I exhale feeling my whole body."

To reach calmness in all of the functions of the body:

Inhaling: "Inhale with serenity."

Exhaling: "I exhale with serenity."

Inhaling: "I inhale with happiness."

Exhaling: "I exhale with happiness.:

The breath becomes the support for an intermediary experience between the physical part and physical parts of the body and makes the body an instrument of psychological experimentation. It is the first step in elevating our body from being a passive organism to being a vehicle for complete spiritual development.

To incorporate spiritual functions;

Inhaling: "I want to inhale recognizing, gathering, liberating my spirit."

Exhaling: "I want to exhale recognizing, gathering, liberating my spirit."

The object of meditation- body, sensations, spirit- is associated with the respiratory function. It is a phenomenon that must be experienced to be understood. It is important to discover that the breath connects the conscious and unconscious, between coarse matter and fine matter, between the automatic and voluntary

functions. It is the control of our physical strength to arrive at contemplation, that must not be purely abstract, theoretical, but accessed by all of our being and our open mindedness. Do not forget that the body is the vehicle for the spirit.

The breath must involve all of the body, that means to breath from the stomach, not to breath from the clavicular in most adults, but to breathe like a baby who sleeps, whose belly rises and falls rhythmically.

When we have succeeded to breathe serenely and master our thoughts, our thoughts will be silent. When you are in a state of prayer you don't think about anything, you are simply present to yourselves, not to your work, not to your worries, not to the troubles of the day, none to the things that wait for you are present: in that moment you can begin opening the conscience to contemplation. In that moment you feel a part of all of the life in the universe, you sense that you are a living being in all of cosmic reality and in communion with all beings, with all that is visible, with all that is invisible, with the created and the Creator. It's about expanding our sense of feeling. With this immersion in the immersion of the cosmos in which we live, we succeed to reach a peace, a serenity and a joy that can accompany us all day long. This is the achievement of the state of silence where our spirit emerges in the reality of God, and perceives in certain instances, as one progresses in this form of prayer, the complete disappearance of present life, and one feels themselves present to all of the cosmos as if we had reached the infinite and immensity of God. This is the disappearance of our conscience, as the individual conscience becomes the universal conscience.

These are the great moments of reconciliation of our being that then helps us to have peace, to have serenity, to have equilibrium, to see all things submerged in the light of God, and not to see them in the ordinary light in which our distracted eyes behold it, or in the agitation of the day in which our mind is consumed by the endless thoughts that torment it and make it distracted. When we are able to reach this opening of conscience, we must also instill a sense of love, of peace with all beings, we must salute all beings with peace, to have in us this capacity to love. If we have people that are unpleasant, hostile, and oppositional, that's the time to call those people with the imagination and say "I am at peace with you." This state of realization of oneself then accompanies us, pacifies us, and reassures us all day and also gives our community prayer meetings all in another sense.

Then the Mass becomes the universal Mass, the Mass without end, the Mass of heaven and earth, not the little Mass celebrated in our community, but the community itself becomes boundless, because we all hold hands during Mass, all the living, all men future, the living and the dead: we hold each other's hand in boundless communion, and

what is possible becomes reality. Then everything becomes easier, more simple, more mature, more exact, and we see the true nature of our littleness, and we laugh at ourselves, because we understand that, by being small, we can ascend to the infinite and experience what it means to be the sons of God. When we return to the noise of daily life we laugh at all the haste, of this struggle, and we feel sorrow, because we understand that man flees from himself: if instead he were able to achieve the full expansion of his consciousness, he would have another rhythm of life, doing the same things that he is doing. I think this is what humanity comes to ask of our monasteries.

In this experience of contemplation, all our problems of rapport with others are sustained by an invisible hand that helps us to see all of the littleness of our friction, the smallness of our views, of our rebellion, of our incomprehension, of our discussions; and also all of the other tensions that may arise within us so that we may remain at the Christian level, they appear in their true measure, in their true dimension, because we have breathed the air of God, we bring it into our lungs, and our eyes have seen the immensity of God and are immersed in His Light. This is how we look at reality with another lens, under another light. It is necessary to win back the dimension and the reality of prayer in order to communicate it to men, without putting on airs of being teachers of prayer: if we are men of prayer, we create around us the reality of prayer and this remains in the soul like pollen that everyone senses, from which everyone draws strength, and which they live by according to their own abilities and generosity.

Breath in us, oh God,
Your vast breath,
Expand in us
And break free from
all constraints
That in us block
The manifestation
Of your freedom!



Universal Prayer

I will try to make the concept of prayer precise with an image from the bible: “In the beginning God created the sky and the earth. The earth was empty of form and order, the Spirit of God was moving in the chaos. God said: Let there be creation and creation appeared.” This is our human condition: we are in the making, immersed in the chaos of form, along the riverbanks there is God, his life-giving Spirit, his creative Word.

Prayer, according to this image, is the reordering of our personal chaos by means of the fount of creation, the Divine mystery. From this meeting the human conscience discovers its essential worth and personal task entrusted to him as a collaborator in creation’s journey toward its full manifestation.

In the religious tradition, christian and non-christian, the practice of prayer is always accompanied by an ascetic practice, by fighting against the enemies who stand in the way of a perfect participation of believers to rise to true life.

Prayer, in the context of the entire human religious experience, is not so much a request addressed to an omnipotent deity—who must be pestered to come to the aid of the person praying in their concrete needs—but rather the ascent of the whole human being to a higher level of consciousness that must give them the energy and the capacity to participate more authentically in the vitality of creation. The fundamental concept of prayer is that human beings are part of a creation that is in the process of being fulfilled; prayer, therefore, is liberation from all those limitations that render our participation in the divine unfolding of creation unreal.³

The Master calls the end of this ascending path the “Kingdom of Heaven.” It is not outside the human conscience, but inside: “The kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). Inside us is the possibility of personal access to a second birth. Religious tradition considers the ordinary condition of man to be in a state of drowsiness, in it, phenomena are not perceived in their full reality but as appearances, *maya*; the path is marked by stages whose names change but whose essence remains the same. St. John of the Cross speaks of four stages: the ordinary state of consciousness; the first vigil: the night of the senses; the second vigil: the night of reason and faith; the third vigil: the divine illumination of the soul. The *Mandukya Upanishad*: *Maya*, the waking state; *Svapna*, the dream state, when the self enters the subtle bodies; *Sushupti*, the third state, dreamless sleep; reason fades away; *Turiya*, perfect knowledge: multiplicity is reunited in unity. A celebrated Indian prayer goes like this: “ Guide us from the unreal to the real, from the darkness to the light, from death to immortality.”

This experience agrees with a celebrated Zen text of Ch’ing Yuan: “First when man studies Zen, the mountains are for him mountains, water is water. When under the guidance of an able instructor he begins the path of Zen, the mountains are no longer for him mountains, and water for him is no longer water. When he reaches the state of rest, the mountains are new mountains and the water is new water. The goal of prayer is the encounter with that truth of beings which lies beyond the reach of the senses—where the fullness of life resides, where the resurrection of the flesh is fulfilled, where everything comes alive. The mountains become mountains once more, but in vivid colors. Prayer expresses the indomitable aspiration of human consciousness toward the fullness of life, love, knowledge, and freedom—attainable by those who tear away the veils of sensory illusion.”

³ Text based on a conference held by Giovanni Vannucci and published in "Faternità" Nuova serie, n. 12-Giugno 2007.

God and this aspiration; prayer and human effort—not innovation—are what bring it to fruition on earth. When Christ says, “Pray without abandoning the struggle” (Luke 18:1), he points out our duty to not give up. Prayer is therefore aspiration and ascent, a boundless desire for life and liberation from all the obstacles that would make victory impossible.

The crowning achievement is infinite life in God. Aspiration is the seed; prayer is the struggle for its growth; its fulfillment is the flower. Christ’s work is to reconnect the seed with the flower, the earth with heaven, to dispel the illusions of the senses, and to open the door to that full reality which manifests itself in the world and through the world.

The contribution of mankind to this work of reunification we offer through prayer, understood as an unceasing journey toward the transfiguration of matter. For this task, Christ urges us not to abandon the battlefield out of cowardice or weakness.

Universal Opening

I have described to you prayer in yourself, in your essence, as is seen from great religious figures. In history we meet figures from organizations that live in a particular religious world: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. From this is born difficulty and division. How do we live the universal opening of prayer within the historical form of Christianity? One might be tempted by syncretism—to choose what seems best from all religious forms and formulate a religion that incorporates their best aspects. This does not seem to me to be a good path—though it is certainly respectable—because it is the product of reason and, if accepted, would entail renouncing many essential qualities: the archetypes linked both to the religious tradition we live by and which has shaped us, and to the characteristics of the lineage to which we belong.

It seems to me that the search for a universal prayer must take into account the particular lineage to which we belong. Think of the images of Christ that have emerged from the collective consciousness of peoples—of the lineages that have believed and continue to believe in Him: the Pantocrator Christ of the Byzantines, the Christ-King and military leader of 16th- and 17th-century Spain, the risen and merciful Christ of central Italy, the Christ-Lawgiver of the Romans, and the Russian Christ portrayed in Dostoevsky’s “The Idiot”—and you will find a single object of the Christian faith manifested in different forms. This diversity stems from the variety of human consciousnesses that have embraced Him, from the diversity of history, and also from the cultural climate of each people. And it is through these figures that individual and diverse believers are able to attain the essential truth of Christ. The Hesychast monks, in their ceaseless invocation of the name of Jesus, affirm his absolute lordship over all

the numerous forms that the Divine had assumed in Greek religiosity, and seek to render ineffective the influences of these archetypes—which they perceive as outdated—and to bring about the triumph within themselves and their people of meekness, the mercy, and the poverty of the one they call the only Lord. The Spaniards, likewise, through the image of Christ as King and Leader, seek to affirm the supremacy of Christ's justice and love. The Russian Christ dramatically emphasizes the presence, humiliation, and self-emptying of the Word of God in all the humiliated and those who have been wronged.

Within the Christian experience, we thus have an absolute and utterly pure figure, as well as representations linked to history, psychology, and the mental capacities specific to individual communities of believers. The same phenomenon can be observed in all religious forms. Beyond all the social or temporal particularities of the major religions—Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism—there emerges a culminating realm that is certainly colored by the distinctive traits of the individual religions but transcends them and connects to a world of archetypes and essential qualities that revolve around the act of creation and the manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

The Religious Word and Its Social Organizations

Underlying what I am saying is an inevitable dualism between the religious essence and the forms it historically assumes in time and space. Judaism, centered on the first Mosaic revelation, developed rituals, temples, a social structure—first tribal, then monarchical—doctrines, laws, and so on. Similarly, Christianity has wrapped the central message of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God in dogmatic, moral, ritual, and social formulations—formulations born of the encounter between a particular human mindset and the mystery of Christ. The Word incarnate is, in itself, timeless, inexpressible, and unnameable; the various forms of Christianity have translated it into time, through their own sensibilities, mental structures, and social—that which is in itself untranslatable. This was the inevitable necessity of the Word incarnate and becoming incarnate in humanity.

At this intersection between the ineffable and expression, timelessness and time, supra-history and history, lies the prayers of the faithful who, eager to live out their Christian ministry heroically, constitute the praying Church. Seeking to express the anxiety of their search through a question, they reflect on their Christian journey, asking themselves: Does my Christian journey end in an encounter with an institution, an ideology, or a series of devotional rites, or in an encounter with Christ, the Son of the living God? And this is the moment of the critical transition from the world perceived by the senses to the supersensible world, from human reasoning to that of God, from the mountains of Chi'ing Yuan to the understanding of their mystery. Once we have passed

through this dark night of the senses, institutions will appear to us in their truth and their heaviness, in their transparency and their opacity; we will not oppose any of them, but we will infuse the life-giving energy of the Spirit into the bones dried up by everyone's lack of vigilance.

A critical act of separation between the formulations and the essential message must be carried out in the consideration of every historical religion if we are to bring about the encounter of all religions in universal prayer. All religions have a dual aspect: one esoteric and one exoteric, and bring into the breast of their experience things that those who have "ears to hear and eyes to see" and those who, "though they have eyes and ears, do not see or hear." The esoteric path—which I might call the path of conscious meditation on the contents of one's own religious experience—is the journey that leads from the letter to the spirit, from the outer structure to its inner soul, from the facts of the letter to the epiphany of the Holy Spirit.

On this path, it is necessary to keep in mind the stages of divine revelation. Revelation manifests itself through the manifestation of specific qualities. I could use this metaphor and say: human consciousness opens up to the divine sun through rhythms of opening. The sun is one, yet the sun revealed by the bud is different from the sun revealed by the rose in full bloom.

Take, for example, the Old Testament religion of the Father and of Justice. It manifests itself through precise knowledge: the relationship between one person and another is established not by the law of the jungle but by dictates that descend from the will of God, who through them frees humanity from the self-centered will of the strongest and unites all—weak and strong alike—in the fulfillment of the divine will. This is the essence of the revelation of the quality of Justice, and we find its manifestations throughout all of humanity contemporary to the revelation at Sinai: in Rome, the Laws of the Twelve Tables; in Greece, Solon; in India, Manu; in China, Confucius and the Tao..... The essence of this revelation is that the human will must lose itself in the divine will in order to find and rise to its truth. The New Testament revelation is that of the Son; the relationship between human consciousness and the mystery of the invisible and visible life is one of love and devotion, love and fulfillment, symbolized by bread and wine. Those who read the writings of the great religious geniuses can carefully discern in them the presence of this newly revealed quality that acts throughout the entire expanse of human consciousness. For example: the Buddha's compassion extends to all beings; the Buddha's prayer expressing his willingness to be reborn as long as there is a soul in need of enlightenment; the Tibetan lama's prayer that his entire physical being may become nourishment for anyone in need of sustenance—all point to the active presence of the quality of "love-in-action" brought by Jesus Christ.

How can we view the figure of Christ from the perspective of universal prayer? The center, the focal point of our religious experience, is Jesus Christ. Christianity is the only religion in which the One Who Is Announced is also the object of the religious relationship. Abraham and Moses proclaim the oneness of God (Yahweh); Muhammad, the oneness of Allah; Buddha, the centrality of the Unnameable, the Indefinable. Christ tells us: "Whoever sees me sees the Father." (John 14:9). To see the Son is to see the Father. Where is the Son? "What you do to the smallest of my brothers, you have done for me" (Matthew 25:40). Brotherhood is born not of a feeling, but of knowledge, the knowledge that in each man there is a fragment of the light of which the incarnated Word is the full manifestation. I will use a comparison: there is a Sun, the Father, who has brought forth from his own substance a mirror capable of reflecting him: the Son, the conscious "I" who knows the Father and is known by the Father. The mirror shatters into myriads of fragments, each of which has not lost the ability to reflect the Sun. Each fragment reflects Him entirely. "The 'I' of every person is a fragment of the 'I' that is in the Father" (John 17:21). Separation does not matter; the fragmented reflection of the one Sun through Jesus Christ will restore the "broken unity." The goal of humanity's journey in Christian revelation is communion, not fusion with the Absolute. Unlike other forms of human religious experience that lead to undifferentiated union with the Absolute, Christianity tends to make the individual human self unique and irreplaceable. Jesus Christ's "I am" marks the eruption of freedom into the world, and, unfortunately, allows future submissions that are regressive, alienating, and profane to be possible.

The Three Aspects of Christian Prayer

At this point, the question arises: how can we, as Christians, live out universal prayer? In Christ and in Christianity, we must distinguish three aspects: the historical reality, the mystical reality, and the cosmic reality of Christ.

The historical Christ. The historical reality of Christ lies in his unique personality. He ushers in a new era of which he is, at the same time, the object of faith. The reality of Christ is the encounter between a historical reality—the Son of Man—and a supra-historical reality—the Son of God. His reality is historical, but animated by a metahistorical energy.

The mystic Christ. After the mystery of Golgotha, in the death and resurrection of Christ, A religious transformation is taking place within humanity: the ritual and initiatory forms of ancient religions are disappearing; temples and blood sacrifices are being abolished; the rite of breaking bread becomes the living center of the new humanity; the most glaring aspects of human fragmentation, such as slavery, are being overcome; where they persist, they give rise to a false consciousness.

The cosmic Christ. The work of the invisible Christ is revealed not only in that part of humanity that has accepted his word, but also in the qualitative transformations recognizable in all religious forms. The Cosmic Christ is present in the relationship between Christ, who “sits at the right hand of the Father,” and all human consciousnesses, regardless of the time and place in which they live and regardless of their direct or indirect knowledge of the Gospel message. One need only reflect on the figures of Gandhi, Vinoba, Aurobindo, etc., to grasp the hidden presence of Christ at the heart of Hinduism.

In Christianity, the mystical body of Christ takes on three characteristic aspects:

- historical-corporeal, linked to time and concrete human qualities, and constituted by the institutions of the historical churches, with their ritual, hierarchical, organizational, and legalistic complexity;
- mystical: the soul of the mystical body consists of the energies of the invisible yet present Christ, which guide believers to experience its transforming reality;
- cosmic: in our time, this is expressed in the yearning for the reunification of all humanity within the Word that is at the origin of each religious experience that finds its fulfillment in the incarnation of the Eternal Word.

The profound search of our time

We are at the beginning of a prodigious mental transformation of humanity; it underlies all the restlessness of our time. We can give it a name: the search for the living center of humanity's profound religious tradition. The search for a relationship with the incarnate Word, to find the right and true way to participate in the mystery of earthly life.

The encounter with the living center of our religious experience makes us alive like the Son of Man, who has no stone on which to rest his head nor a shelter in which to spend the night. When the consciousness that dwells in the living center of Christ is shown the supreme goal of dominion over matter; one thinks of the Spirit, the energy that transfigures the earth; when the Spirit is pointed out as the sole meaning of life, one thinks of matter, the matrix destined to receive the Spirit so that He may be incarnated in it.

At the heart of universal prayer, humanity lives by transcending itself; it finds itself only by losing itself: life is possessed by those who continually cast it into the fray. The Kingdom of Heaven is within us, nascent and alive like a living seed. Our tragedy lies in seeking to confine the infinite within the limitations of our mental formulations and our social structures. Jesus Christ revealed to us that He is one with the Father, that we are

all on a journey toward unity with the Father, and that infinite divine consciousness is one with the most Scorned by men, one with nature, and bread and wine are her flesh and blood.

There are two possible responses to Christ's absolute demand: one, which I would call almost universal, lies between the compromise of our psyches and the Christian newness. In this response, cultural, ideological, and character- and temperament-based conditioning degrade the encounter into images, idolatry, and archaisms. The other—which I would call the response of a conscience liberated by universal prayer—consists in freeing ourselves from all psychological conditioning and cultural influences in order to embrace the newness of the Incarnate Word in all its intensity and scope.

Universal prayer blossoms from those new consciences that, in their encounter with the living center of Christ, have become universal; it is the only way to restore vitality to our Church and transform it into a community that proclaims the transfiguration of humanity.

Universal prayer, by welcoming the eternal Word without limitations, allows us to live the Christian "I Am," the eternity of our true Self: it allows us to live with an awareness of the eternity in which we existed when the seal of God's love was imprinted upon us.

In universal prayer, thought becomes living and creative, and we will be able to carry out our service of redemption without fearing structural rigidity, because in the infinite consciousness of Christ, everything is past, and only Life and the eternal present remain.

Oh Lord

give us strength,
patience, the purity
necessary to reach

to your constant
contemplation

and to belong to you
without shadow and
without limits.



Questions About Prayer

This chapter gives answers, given by theme, to the questions on preparation that were made at the end of the conference held at the Hermitage of Ronzano (Bologna) July 28, 1982. They should therefore be placed within that context (although the recordings do not always make it possible to understand the content of the audience's comments), but they nonetheless allow for a deeper exploration and broader examination of the themes addressed there.

In addition to these, to round out the reflection on the Lord's Prayer, there are the insights that Father Giovanni offered two years later, during the discussion that followed the Lectio Divina held at the Eremo delle Stinche on the evening of June 9, 1984—the eve of Pentecost—just a few days before his death on June 18.

Is the prayer of the recitation of the name of Jesus possible today?

I believe that is proposed, but with great usefulness! It cannot be imposed because it may be that one needs other forms of prayer. The pacification of our body is necessary

in the moment of prayer. Some can find it in the simple forms of yoga as in the prayer of Mount Athos, or in the more complicated form of yoga handed down from the Tibetans.

Note: in the East there is also a simplified form of yoga; there are still great yogis who know all of the positions of the technique. But, I observe in the ashram of Sri Aurobindo, as also in Ramana Maharshi and others, they put these things in the background. The thing required is to pacify the body, to be silent in the moment of prayer, and concentration is brought to the heart center or to the solar plexus a little lower. Breathing can be requested or not requested, a great freedom comes.

Franciscan Spirituality: the monks and prayer

When one speaks of “Franciscanism,” there is first of all the personal experience of Saint Francis; in other words, when one says “Franciscanism” like “Dominicanism” or others, one uses a very vague term. When one speaks of Yoga, of Karma-Yoga, etc, one speaks of a precise system of positions of the body that must be used under the guidance of a master. Like when esicastic prayer speaks of breathing, it is based on the knowledge of esoteric yoga that we have forgotten.

It may be that in early Franciscanism, which was closely connected to *Sufi* movements, these practices—the *dhikr*, for example, the invocation of Allah—the essence of the Sufi monks’ oral prayer, which is very similar to the prayer on Mount Athos—were known and practiced; and it may be that the early Franciscans, and above all St. Francis, had heard of them either directly or indirectly and wished to experiment with them. These matters deserve in-depth study.... The only religious movement that introduced a system of meditative inquiry is Jesuitism: the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola presuppose such an attitude—above all, a mental and imaginative one—in the person who meditates.

I think this; Western monasticism must have its life of prayer, it is not a pure case that the first Franciscans have always had monasteries near grottos, like also in our order, the servants of Mary, that is very connected to the first beggars movement, always having grottos. Certainly, the brothers were not going there to make penance, but to experience a form of consciousness that was born in total silence.

Try to go in a grotto to be there for a weekend: you will see that in you comes a transformation of consciousness! All the thoughts that laugh and torment you during the day, also in the moments that you want to have silence, first interfere against us (these are the temptations of Saint Anthony), after they vanish remain a thought and a silent

will, a silent sensibility and a purified body of all our wandering sensations that constitute our daily reality.

They were reaching the silence that came in that grotto; surely it was not to 'make penances, at least a return to the being of one's origin was not meant to be penance.

We need to study these things again.

In other words, here in the West we have another way of contemplation: for example, the alchemical meditation that we have ousted from our religious experience. Studying the alchemical path, we discover that a great part of our liturgy is impregnated by alchemy: it's no wonder that great monks have been great alchemists....And the alchemical path, too, had its own forms of prayer, of reuniting the self. It would be very important to research Western paths of contemplation....

The East helps us greatly! It has brought our attention to so many realities of our spirit, of our mind and also of the physical that we have forgotten. For example, I am certain that the early Christians, until the rise of the modern age, around 1700, had always had an esoteric vision of the human body that we have lost. When we make the little sign of the croce, we touch three points. Why? Because here there are three chakras, the highest ones in the front, from the lips and of the heart: the formation of the word, the pronunciation of the word and the love that set our words ablaze.

Why are hands placed on the priest's head during ordination? Look at the statue of Buddha and you will see that at the top of the skull there is a center where the "lotus of a thousand petals" blooms..... We must be grateful to the East for allowing us to reinterpret certain fundamental texts of our religious experience with greater insight, because we had lost this information.

The monks of Mount Athos concentrate their attention on the naval, they don't worship it.... But because at this point there is a very important center that must be revealed, if we want our whole body to rejoice, transfigured in the light of God. So, we try this experience under the guidance of a person that has this wisdom. We may have to simplify things—because here in the West, that's also necessary to do this—but we'll see things with new eyes and discover within ourselves possibilities for transfiguration and spirituality that we would otherwise have lost forever.

Relationship between prayer and reading sacred texts

In the East they present their sacred texts with accuracy, precision, a veneration which would make us blush. Think about it: the Koran is sung with precise modulations that translate the vibrations of a single word into individual sentences. In India other sacred books are sung like this. You can experience this for yourself, because there are now recordings of readings from the sacred texts made by Buddhist monks, Tibetan monks, Zen monks, or Hindus in which you will sense the reverence with which they read the Holy Scriptures.

A French Jewish scholar and musician went back to reading the Hebrew text of the Bible and noticed these small marks—which are called Masoretic marks and which we had been taught were created by the Jews to ensure that nothing was altered in the transcription of Hebrew texts. This scholar studied those marks in depth, uncovered new insights, and realized that they were a way of singing (they didn't yet know the musical staff), a structure of notes placed above the Hebrew text: she transcribed them, and beautiful melodies emerged.

After all, in synagogues, Jews always chant their texts.... And they do this because they have a different concept than we do: for us, in fact—unaccustomed as we are to reading aloud—the written word has no sound; written words convey the meaning of the term, but not its vibration. For the ancients, this was not the case; sacred texts, in particular, possess precise vibrations. Certain Gregorian chants—for example, the *Christus* on Holy Thursday—when performed with full concentration, allow you to feel illuminating vibrations resonating within your very being. Gregorian chant is now being reexamined from this perspective as well. Have you ever heard an Eastern person chant the OM*? It's something that truly moves you! These are vibrations that enter us and shake us to the core.

The melodies are not random; they are specifically designed to produce certain vibrational effects in human beings. We are rediscovering this. If we were to read Christ's words in the Greek text of the New Testament and allow them to resonate within us, they would surely produce something within us that commentators cannot express.

Have you ever heard choral music where there are no words, but simply a melody? It sinks into our very being, shakes us, leads us to silence, and prompts us to reflect on things we had never thought of before. It's like a powerful electric shock running through our entire nervous system—both visible and invisible...

Music and Meditation

What do we want to achieve with meditation? Self awareness—not in the world of ordinary life's phenomena, but within our souls, that is, toward the infinite.

Listening to music can put you in this state of profound silence, in which you are revealed to yourself and feel that your path leads toward the infinite, not toward the petty things of existence.

Then, meditate...

The Harmony of Silence.

It is difficult to explain the mechanism of this vibration. One needs to put oneself in silence and listen to music, and then and then for each person to reflect on what this music evokes within them...

The entire universe is in harmony: in a state of silence, aided by the harmony of music, we listen to the harmony of the cosmos and become part of this vaster consciousness—which is our conscious and deeply moved participation in the entire mystery of universal life.

I have books on medicine practiced through music, through sound. These things are being experimented with. Perhaps we have too crude a view of existence; we say: "Matter is this..." No! Matter is vibration; even the tiniest particles that make up our being can be vibration; our nerve cells are vibration, energy. If we introduce energies that harmonize and pacify these minute particles of ours—which are important because they are the building blocks of our being—then we enter a state of contemplation and discover a reality far beyond our narrow, concrete perspectives.

Returning to the center of ourselves

I return to the center, when I forget my small mind, my small I, my small heart, and I reach and expand myself in the whole universe, and feel God lives in the cosmos. Within the smallest cells that constitute my being there is a subtle connection that is reflected in my consciousness, which grows ever more expansive. Then I begin to understand that my destiny is infinitely greater than myself; it is a consciousness greater than my own and then the combined consciousness of all humanity: it is something even vaster.

Therefore, I set out toward this greater Consciousness, this more immense Light that stimulates my small light and expands it.

Enter in a forest, and feel united with the smallest blade of grass, with the crickets singing, with all the nests in the trees, with all all the vessels beneath the bark of the trees; then it flows to all the hearts that live near and far; then move on to all the hearts that are in communion with everyone; then go beyond the earth, and feel yourself in a vibrational connection with what is happening in the most distant galaxy; then emerge from this silent contemplation, from this immersion in the Infinite—as Leopardi would say—and then return to ordinary life with a different awareness. Then you feel that you love everyone, that you are ready to communicate with everyone, that you are ready to step beyond the small confines of your mind and your theories to take in what others think, feel, and see. In this way, you acquire a universal consciousness. Our ordinary state is this: there is me and there is you; there is me and there is the cosmos—the cosmos as an object of my knowledge... But let's try turning the tables: I am in the cosmos just like all of you, and the cosmos is within me. Then my consciousness breaks through the limits of my small self and becomes universal. Thus I discover that there is a potential consciousness that can expand into joy, knowledge, and peace; I discover that in every existing being there is a presence of consciousness that communicates with my consciousness and enriches it, and, through my consciousness, expands throughout the entire universe...

So what are our gossip, our fears, our struggles, our petty dominions—what are our ideas if not the effect of limited consciousnesses?

If we were to expand infinitely, and all human beings were to expand infinitely, surely these petty distinctions between “mine” and “yours,” “ours” and “theirs,” would disappear. Then we would all be children of God, as this divine spark matures within us—a spark that is meant to lead our small consciousness into the immense Consciousness of God.

The Experience of the Cross

As we approach these great themes, we must have one profound concern: to silence our mind—all the notions it holds—since we are bound to a particular environment.

You speak of the experience of the Cross, and by this you mean a painful experience of existence, whereas the symbol of the Cross transcends all suffering. The notions of suffering, renunciation, and liberation are present in all religious experiences.

But Anandamayi, this great living figure of Hinduism, said, “Don’t speak to me of sacrifices when you are asked to make small renunciations in life. We make the great sacrifice when we give up walking toward God.” Because we distort our nature.

So, this concept of renunciation and liberation is present in all religious experiences.

The Prayer of Jesus

What is the prayer of Jesus? When the apostles asked him “Teach us to pray!” What prayer did Jesus teach them?

So, let’s pause here and try to explore in depth all the mental, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of Christ’s prayer.

We’re used to reciting the Lord’s Prayer mechanically... Let’s pause to consider each petition one by one (as St. Ignatius of Loyola recommends). After each petition, take a breath. Then, you’ll begin to understand.... Notice this: behind the structure of the Lord’s Prayer lies the essential structure of universal prayer—both Christian and non-Christian! And it is the prayer of the Son of Man and the Son of God; therefore, it is universal. Jesus did not use the sacred texts. When the disciples asked, “What is prayer?”, he didn’t say, “Take the Psalter.” That came later in the Church.... The Hebrew language is completely different from ours, and our translations are often distortions. Hebrew is a sacred language; Greek is a profane language; Latin is a profane language—just like our own languages... This is what all scholars of Oriental studies tell us, whether they specialize in Judaism or Islam....

If H. Corbin comes to me and says, “Arabic is a sacred language, and French—which translates Arabic—is not a sacred language,” what is he trying to tell me? I started reading his work, and he convinced me. If C. Suares comes to me and says, “The Hebrew language is a sacred language; your Western language is not sacred.” I’ll have him explain it to me, and if he convinces me, I’ll go along with this scholar’s view. And then I began to understand that the Hebrew language must be interpreted according to Hebrew models.

“What happened to the Old Testament when it passed into Christianity”—and the Jews rightly remind us of this!—We interpreted it in terms of Christianity: this is acceptable and some of it is not...

It would be good that we, priests in particular, know Hebrew and Greek well.

Earlier I said this about the Psalms: Christ prayed with the Psalms. All right! But when they asked him about prayer, he gave them the Lord’s Prayer. Let’s explore this further!

I think that the Lord’s Prayer—to use Eastern terminology—is the great “Mantra,” that is, the great prayer of awakening that Christ entrusted to us. To awaken us! And what I’ve been trying to tell you was meant to help you discover your own prayer and your own meditation. Later we’ll also explore the Psalms... but first, let’s discover this great word that Christ left us!

The Our Father

Father Giovanni, what is prayer?⁴

It is a transfiguration of our being in God, in the first Light. Prayer is not asking; if we ask, it is because we still live in the world of duality. But when we have transcended this world of duality, then we feel that God lives within us, that the Spirit lives within us, and that Christ is present in our human suffering as well as in our deepest longings. Then we begin to ascend.

So it is not an act, but a state, a way of being.

It is a state. What is the prayer of a tree, of the cherry tree? It is to be filled with flowers and fruit.

In the "Our Father," however, we turn to Jesus not so much to awaken ourselves, but to make requests of him... Those requests are ones we have imposed on ourselves.

What was the original Our Father like?

I would like to suggest to these young people to study Hebrew.. In Hebrew there are two languages: the language of official Hebrew- the Jews speak Hebrew, that is the language of ordinary communication- but then there is the sacred language, that is different, and is rediscovered patiently, with tenacity, attentiveness, but above all in the silence and the ascension of our being. Now, the sacred Hebrew language is not a grammatical language, but a sacred language, known only in two ways: the state of perfection and the state of imperfection: the ripe fruit that tends toward decay in order to tend toward maturity. Thus, there is a "perfect" and an "imperfect" (though not in our grammatical sense) of a perfectly fulfilled reality that then, at a certain moment, gives rise to another reality.

Thus, in the Lord's Prayer, there is no subjunctive or optative mood; there is only a statement of faith: not "Thy Kingdom come," but "Thy Kingdom is coming." Not "Thy will be done," but "Thy will is done in heaven and on earth." Not "Give us this day our daily bread," but "You give us today's bread and tomorrow's" ("daily" means this). "You forgive us our debts when we forgive our debtors." "You do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil." These are all affirmations of faith, because, if we believe in God... Christ says: "Your Father in heaven knows very well what you need," so there's no need to ask! "You give us our bread for today and tomorrow. You do not lead us into

⁴ These are the questions asked of Father Giovanni following the Lectio Divina on the Our Father on June 9, 1984.

temptation, but when we find ourselves in need, you deliver us from evil.” You see, it’s different.....

Our Father who art in
heaven,

hallowed be Thy
name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done on
earth as it is in
heaven.

Give us this day our
daily bread.

Forgive us our debts,
as we also forgive our
debtors.

Lead us not into
temptation,
but deliver us from
evil.

O Lord
Make our soul only
A song of Love.

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