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## “Jacob’s ladder”

### Letter 61

### Fr. Henri Caffarel

### being present to God; Letters on Prayer

1983

My dear Francois, I am happy to hear you say that you never pray in isolation, but that, from the beginning of your mental prayer, you join in spirit with your brothers and sisters all over the world. Indeed, a Christian is no longer a solitary person. By his baptism, the great Catholic (i.e., Universal) Assembly is opened to him. When he prays, it must henceforth be *in* the Church, *with* the Church, and *in the name* of the World.

But you must also unite with the heavenly Jerusalem, and not only with the earthly Church. Come now, cross the threshold of the City of God, and enter. A festive assembly will welcome you, the assembly of the angels and saints who are forever celebrating the worship of the living God.

In the Book of Revelation, St. John gives a magnificent description of this heavenly liturgy:

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*A throne was standing there in heaven, and on the throne was seated One whose appearance had a gemlike sparkle as of jasper and carnelian.*

*...Surrounding this throne were twenty-four other thrones upon which were seated twenty-four elders; they were clothed in white garments and had crowns of gold on their heads....The floor around the throne was like a sea of glass that was crystal-clear.*

*At the very center, around the throne itself, stood four living creatures covered with eyes front and back....Day and night, without pause, they sing:*

*“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,  
He who was, and who is, and who is to come!”*

*Whenever these creatures give glory and honor and praise to the One seated on the throne, who lives forever and , the twenty-four elders fall down be*

*fore the One seated on the throne, and worship him who lives forever and ever. They throw down their crowns and sing:*

*“O Lord our God, you are worthy  
to receive glory and honor and power!  
For you have created all things;  
by your will they came to be and were made!”*

(Rv 4:2-11)

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But in the midst of this eternal praise, a “new hymn” rises up. It celebrates the incarnation, death, and victory of the Son of God, who came to reveal to men the infinite love of his Father:

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*As my vision continued, I heard the voices of many angels who surrounded the throne and the living creatures and the elders. They were countless in number, thousands and tens of thousands, and they all cried out:*

*“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain  
to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength,  
honor and glory and praise!”*

*Then I heard the voices of every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea; everything in the universe cried aloud:*

*“To the One seated on the throne, and to the Lamb,  
be praise and honor, glory and might,  
forever and ever!”*

*The four living creatures answered, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.*

(Rv 5:11-14)

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And so Christ is at the center of this liturgy. How could the Church fail to be present too? Where does the faithful Spouse remain, if not close to the Bridegroom? This applies not only to the Church triumphant, but to the pilgrim, laboring, fighting Church, the Church of this earth. Indeed, every Preface of the Mass reminds us of it:

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*Through him the choirs of angels and all the powers of heaven praise*

*and worship your glory. May our voices blend with theirs as we join in their unending hymn: Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory!*

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Be sure you understand this: the *Sanctus* of the Mass is infinitely more than a distant echo of the heavenly feast. It means that the Christian people is joining the jubilant assembly; that the earthly liturgy is incorporated into the liturgy of the angels; that we sinners have the right to take part in the heavenly worship in honor of the holiness of God and the glory of Christ the Victor.

Do not imagine that I have strayed from our subject. I am aware that I am talking to you about mental prayer, and not about liturgical prayer. But the point is that mental prayer is in very close contact with the world of the angels. An incident in the Bible makes this point very well. When night fell, Jacob fell asleep after placing a stone under his head. Actually, his was a mysterious sleep like that of Adam at the time of woman's creation, or like that of Abraham at the time of the Covenant. It was a prayer-sleep: "*I was sleeping, but my heart kept vigil*" (Sg 5:2).

During this sleep, Jacob saw a ladder, firmly planted on the earth, that reached up to the heavens. On this ladder, angels came and went, ascended and descended. Similarly when the Christian prays, the angels are immediately alerted and irresistibly drawn toward him. They come to convoke him to their great liturgy, and they fraternally draw him into it. There is nothing surprising about this. Does not Christ himself pray in the man or woman who is engaged in mental prayer? And as Jesus declared, "*I solemnly assure you, you shall see the sky opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man*" (Jn 1:51).