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“To be or to act?”

Letter 91

Fr. Henri Caffarel

being present to God; Letters on Prayer

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During our last visit, I told you that Christian prayer is not merely a human activity. Rather, it springs from the depths of our “Christian being,” that *“shares in the divine nature”* (cf 2 P 1:4). And as you probably remember, I added, “Don’t pray with your human intellect or emotions. Pray with your innermost being.”

As it happens, this “prayer of one’s being” is evoked in a letter I have just received. I am copying a passage from it for you. As you will see, it is not written in a Christian climate. A certain pantheistic mentality seems to pervade it. That doesn’t prevent the advice that my correspondent received from being understood in a sense acceptable to a Christian.

And now here’s the letter:

During a business trip around the world, I had the opportunity to spend a few days in India. My mind was still full of the things I had read many years before, about this prestigious land. And so I asked my French friends who were offering me hospitality, and who had lived in India many years, whether there were still any of those “holy men,” permeated with wisdom and prayer, whose influence had been so great in India over the centuries.

Actually, this was not the world in which my friends lived. Anyway, being anxious to please me, they made inquiries. And one day they brought me into a small, remote village, and left me at the house of a “holy man.” They had been told he had great renown throughout the region.

The man, who received me in a kind of a hut, was about seventy years old. Poor, thin, and wearing only a loincloth, he gave the appearance of great moral strength and purity of soul.

I told him in my halting English that I was a Catholic, but didn’t want to leave India without being counseled by a wise man, rich in the religious traditions of the country.

What a surprise for me to learn that he was British! For many years he had practiced medicine in this distant land. For the past fifteen years, he has spent his life in prayer, and in teaching the ways of prayer to those who come to him. His spirituality seemed rather offbeat, but deeply religious.

He looked at me for a long time. I wondered if he had understood me. I was almost embarrassed by his gaze—clear, insistent, and penetrating, but also very kindly.

At last, he began to question me. “Do you pray every day?” “Yes,” I answered, “but only for a short while.” “And how do you pray?” I described my method of mental prayer: adoration, reflection on a page of Scripture, then praise, and finally petitions for myself and for others.

He smiled as he listened to me. It was a smile full of sympathy, but, seemingly, not free from a certain condescension.

He went on to say, “Westerners always think that to pray is to *do* something. Here, all the sages have taught us that prayer is to *be*. If there is being, of what use is the added doing? If there is no being, then the doing is devoid of value.” Seeing that I didn’t understand his thought at first, he explained.

“To pray is to be. I am not speaking of activities or attitudes of the mind. Being is the substance of man. That is what we must bring to God. We must be there, attentive to God, with him, for him, and in his presence, stripped of all having and all doing. Being is the only true action, the action that is intense, surging, irrepressible, efficacious, and powerful.

“It isn’t easy to be. Our being is covered over with the sediments of non-being. We must begin by freeing ourselves from them. Our being must be revitalized. Then it must be exposed naked to the rays of divinity. Then perhaps, someday, it will be drawn in by the Great Being, like the drop of dew that evaporates in the sunshine and goes to join the clouds.

“On that day, to be will consist in being in the One who is, being in God, being God.”

Turning to me, the “holy man” asked, “Do you want to pray for a moment with me?” And seated on the bare earth in the Buddha position, my host recollected himself, or rather was seized by recollection. All at once, I felt he was miles away from me. I couldn’t pray. I couldn’t take my eyes off his face, which was becoming more beautiful with each passing minute, as though transparent to a light within him.

Time slipped by unnoticed. At nightfall, I withdrew without making the slightest noise. But he opened his eyes and looked at me with great love: “From now on when you pray to your God, we shall be side by side just as we were today, more perfectly than today.”