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The Piety of Jesus

In this article Father Rausch, of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, attempts to reconstruct the piety of Jesus, centering on the importance of prayer in his life.

Thomas P. Rausch, S.J.

“**R**ELEVANCY” is an enduring paradox. By the time the Church becomes aware of the contemporary needs of the world, those needs have already changed. The Church all too often frantically adapts herself to meet yesterday’s problems; the world, unhealed and unredeemed, struggles alone with the present.

So it is today. While churches and religious communities plunge themselves into the secular, divest themselves of un-contemporary religious symbols in their life styles and language, while theologians and laymen advocate political theology and secular “involvement,” the children of the counterculture—today’s children—search desperately for a religious experience. Their counterculture is a revolt against a manipulative society dominated by technology, a technology derived from a secularized science’s objectification of the world. Theodore Roszak, and perceptive social commentators from Andrew Greeley to Michael Novak, describe the search of the young for some kind of mystical union. The secret of the novelist Herman Hesse’s appeal is precisely his concern with the mystical search. Certainly one

cannot live in Berkeley today and be unaware that young people are meditating, from the crowded lawns of the campus even to the rooftops.

Yet the Church, rich in a tradition of prayer, both ordinary and mystical, has failed them. So they have turned to the offbeat, the arcane, and the occult. Astrology and witchcraft, psychedelic drug cults and Esalen-type celebrations of sensory awareness, Zen meditations and spiritualism, even the Hari Krishna movement—all are avenues of search for a frustrated longing of the spirit.

In a perceptive article¹ Henry Nouwen has argued that the Christian leader of tomorrow must be a "contemplative critic," a man free of the worship of idols who can discern the movement of the Lord behind the painful flux of the present moment, a leader who "must be in the future what he always had to be in the past: a man of prayer, a man who has to pray and who has to pray always."

Unfortunately the ministerial leaders of tomorrow's churches do not seem to be very much more aware of this dimension of their ministry than are the leaders of today's. Many seminarians profess no interest in prayer, appealing to today's popular theologies which see prayer as the belief of an earlier age less free of mythological elements than our own. Based on the false premise that one could in some way "manipulate God," an attention to prayer in the privacy of one's aloneness only frustrated the real discovery of God in the neighbor. Or so runs the usual argument.

Few today seem to recognize any value in a personal prayer which has always been part of the tradition of the Church. At a recent meeting of the theological schools of seven religious orders, representatives from three of these schools reported that personal prayer no longer plays any part in the religious lives of their community members; one stated that in his community even the "nostalgia" for it was now gone. We have become so sophisticated! One ex-novice gave me as one of his reasons for leaving the novitiate the fact that he felt he was being asked "to imitate Christ," an idea he viewed with some repulsion.

Perhaps traditional Christian piety is also gone. Yet, given the centrality of the life of Christ for the Christian, it is difficult to understand how we can afford to look down so easily on traditional Christian piety which has always been seen as some kind of an imitation of Christ, sharing in his suffering and becoming like him in death, that if possible we may attain the resurrection from the dead (Phil. 3:10-11). Too often Christian piety has lost sight of its ideal, the piety of Jesus, and consequently even the concept of piety has been rejected. Perhaps this is partly responsible for the present malaise in the Church, leaving us rootless and alone in a time of rapid change. My purpose then in this article is to attempt a reconstruction of the piety of Jesus.

PIETY

Part of the problem encountered in talking about piety today is that the word has so many unhappy connotations. Catholics think immediately of effeminate pictures of the Sacred Heart, prayers to "the lonely prisoner in the tabernacle," and Rosary Crusades with uniformed children. Protestants visualize stern, unsublimated Pilgrims, revival tents, "blue laws," and unloving Scripture-quoting Freudian fathers.

The English word *piety* is defined as "dutifulness in religion" while the adjective *pious* means "marked by or showing reverence for the deity and devotion to divine worship"; it connotes the sacred or devout as distinct from the profane or secular. These words are derived from the Latin *pietas* and *pious* respectively. The adjective *pious* carried the meaning "acting dutifully" and *pietas* "dutifulness" to the gods, also to one's parents, to one's native country, or to benefactors. The model of Latin piety was Virgil's epic hero Aeneas who deserved the epithet *pious Aeneas* because he was first of all sensitive to the will of the gods and to his filial obligations and, secondly, because he acted accordingly. In comparison then, religious piety can be described as both a religious sensitivity and a consequent responsibility.

THE PIETY OF JESUS

Any attempt to describe the piety of Jesus runs up against our problem of understanding Jesus' self-consciousness. Yet to avoid

the question of his piety is to impoverish our understanding of the Christian life, which should be modeled on his piety and his life. Therefore we shall proceed, keeping in mind the following methodological principles:

1. Jesus was a man of his times. Hence his religious consciousness as a historical human being was that of the people from which he came, and as such, is open to analysis through critical historical study.
2. The Gospels present us with various pictures of the religious sensitivity of Jesus. This is especially true of the Gospel of Luke, in which the prayer of Jesus and his religious experience are important themes, and therefore open to study through careful exegesis.
3. Such an approach prescind from the question of the divinity of Jesus, which it does not deny. Rather its standpoint is his humanity, taken seriously, but not analyzed further than critical historical and scriptural evidence will allow. It thus further prescind from the question of the development of Jesus' self-understanding and sense of identity, though this question is one that needs to be approached in the future.

With our investigation so structured, we can gain an insight into the piety of Jesus, his religious sensitivity and consequent practice. At least four characteristics of his piety emerge: (a) faithfulness to tradition, (b) obedience to God, (c) dedication to service, and (d) the spirit of prayer.

FAITHFULNESS TO TRADITION

Jesus as man was a man of his times; his human consciousness was that of a Palestinian Jew of the first century with a religious awareness shaped by the rich tradition of the Old Testament. It was this religious tradition, studied from his childhood, which served as the matrix from which Jesus, through his personal prayer and reflection, was able to discern his own vocation to Israel.

As a Jew Jesus accepted without question the authority of the Law and the Scriptures as the revealed and revealing word of God. He knew the Scriptures thoroughly and often cited them in his own teaching. When he was challenged by the Pharisees on the question of divorce (Mark 10:17-19), he appealed to two passages in the Law in his own defense (Gen. 1:27; 2:24).

As Rudolph Bultmann has pointed out, it does not matter if some of the sayings of Jesus citing the words of Scripture were put into his mouth by the Evangelists, for the early Church could not possibly have taken adherence to the Law for granted and even defended it against Paul (Acts 15) if Jesus himself had attacked the authority of the Law. Jesus said that he did not come to destroy the Law, but rather to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17).

Jesus did consider himself able to interpret the Law as he frequently did, but this was customary and his right as a teacher. Indeed, Bultmann holds that Jesus belonged to the class of the Scribes, the scholars and intellectuals of Judaism who received the title "rabbi," the title of respect reserved for a learned teacher. Whether or not Jesus actually took the requisite scribal tests, it is clear that he lived as a rabbi. Thus he regularly took his place as a teacher in the synagogue and was sought out for his counsel in matters of the Law (Mark 12:28-34). He gathered around him a circle of "disciples," the official word for pupils, and with his disciples, with those who sought his counsel, and with his opponents he disputed in the accepted form over questions of the Law.

It is important to note that for Jesus mere observance of the Law is never in itself sufficient for salvation; he teaches that repentant sinners enter the kingdom of heaven before the unrepentant righteous (Matt. 2:28-32; Luke 15:1-10). The Law by itself is an insufficient means of reaching God; one must also accept Jesus (Matt. 10:32 ff.; Luke 12:8 ff.) towards whom the Law is directed.

Yet this last statement was not a point of departure. Rather it was a conclusion, the fruit of a lifetime of religious sensitivity, of immersion in and assimilation of a religious tradition, of personal

prayer and discernment, of the study of God's word and the response to his Spirit. It was the fruit of a life of faithfulness, and of obedience.

OBEDIENCE TO GOD

As a Jew steeped in the tradition of the Old Testament, Jesus saw as a fundamental ethical principle obedience to the will of God. Obedience was of the essence of Jewish morality. It was also an essential characteristic of the piety of Jesus. Yet in the Judaism of his own day obedience had degenerated into a formalistic legalism and from this Jesus departed, as did other Jewish teachers. He stressed continually the primacy of the ethical commandments revealed in the Law and prophets (Mark 10:19). This brought him into early collision with both the Scribes, who taught that all passages of Scripture were equally binding, and with the Pharisees, who safeguarded observance of the Law by building around it a fence of prohibitive interpretations. Jesus accused the latter of straining out moths and swallowing camels (Matt. 23:24).

Stressing the ethical, Jesus suggests on the question of Sabbath observance that not doing good in order to observe some prohibition is tantamount to doing evil (Luke 14:1-6). He often rebuked both Scribes and Pharisees for rejecting the commandments of God in favor of their own traditions (Mark 7:9-13; Matt. 23:13).

Jesus' own life was one of total obedience to the will of God and his own inner struggle to remain faithful to God's plan is revealed to us in the Gospels. The story of the temptations in the desert, barely mentioned by Mark and told in full by Luke and Matthew, though with different emphasis, marks a period of struggle in the life of Jesus over the kind of messianic role he was to exercise. Political messiahship, with power, glory, and wealth was the common expectation in his own day; this was the temptation. Though the narratives provide varying interpretations it is obvious that Jesus, truly a man of his times, must have wrestled with the question of a political messiahship. We know, however, that his decision was to follow his messianic

vocation in humility, complete openness, and obedience to the will of God.

That Jesus faced struggle and doubt within himself is confirmed in the narratives of the agony in the garden where he prays for deliverance from the sufferings of his coming passion; yet he ends his prayer asking that God's will and not his own be done. This complete obedience to the Father, praised theologically so often in Paul and in Hebrews (5:7-10), reaches its complete fulfillment in his total abandonment of himself to the Father at the moment of his death, as recorded by Luke: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" (23:46).

Finally in the post-Resurrection accounts of Luke it is three times made clear, each time with increasing emphasis, how the Passion, Death and Resurrection have been foretold by the Scriptures. Such an emphasis is more than merely a theological response to the scandal of the Crucifixion. Luke, whose work Gospel-Acts comprises a whole structured on the history of salvation, is also stressing that Jesus' glorification has been accomplished through his complete obedience to God's salvific will.

DEDICATION TO SERVICE

Out of this same Old Testament tradition with which Jesus was so familiar comes as the highest expression of his ethical teaching the commandment of love. This was not a new law with Jesus, for the commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) was used in Jewish literature as a summary of the Law, though in the restricted sense of applying only to Jews and resident aliens. Jesus himself states this great commandment as the correlative to the law of loving God with one's whole heart and soul and mind and strength (Mark 12:28-31); thus the commandment of love becomes for him an expression of the will of God fulfilled through one's conduct towards others.

This Jesus lived to the full in his own life and death. All four Gospels reveal Jesus in his public ministry as living a life of service towards others. Luke represents him as beginning his public life by reading as fulfilled in himself a prophecy of

Isaiah (61:1-2), which Jesus uses as a statement of the messianic purpose of his own ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim
release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18-19).

When John the Baptist sends his disciples to Jesus requesting a confirming messianic sign of his vocation Jesus answers: "Go tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them" (Luke 7:22).

Luke reveals the special concern of Jesus for the poor, for segregated groups, and for minorities; Jesus ministers to and praises women, lepers, Samaritans, public sinners and tax collectors, soldiers, even a thief. His concern for the poor is evident in his instructions on poverty and in the fact that in the Lucan sermon on the plain Jesus says simply, "Happy are you poor" (6:20).

Although the servant theology is clear in all the Gospels, it is especially significant in Luke who summarizes the entire ministry of Jesus and places it in its proper eschatological perspective when he situates Jesus' words "I am among you as one who serves" at the Last Supper (22:27).

SPIRIT OF PRAYER

It is in the prayer of Jesus that we discover the center of his piety. As a member of a religious people with a full liturgical tradition, he took an active part in the traditional Jewish liturgical practices. Not only did he participate regularly in the official Sabbath worship "as was his custom" (Luke 4:16), but he also followed the official custom of praying three times a day, at sunrise, in the afternoon (after the sacrifice offered in the Temple),

and in the evening. Joachim Jeremias notes that in all probability no day went by in the life of Jesus without the formal three times of prayer, including the morning and evening recital of the *Shema*, the credal formula beginning "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord."

Contrary to the opinion of some, Jesus did not object to Jewish pious practices, but only to prayers done out of personal vanity rather than with a sincere heart (Matt. 6:1-8). But in addition to participating in the practices of Jewish piety, he also had a rich and unique prayer life of his own.

Although all the Gospels stress the prayer of Jesus, it is again in Luke that we can begin to understand the significance of Jesus' prayer for his own life. This comes as no surprise, for of the three Synoptics, it is Luke alone who merits the title "theologian." Here prayer emerges as the living soul of the piety of Jesus. Besides the Lord's Prayer, with its own special significance, Luke gives eight principal instances of Jesus at prayer, usually introducing decisive events in his life (3:21 ff.; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; 9:28 ff.; 11:1 ff.; 22:42; 23:46); he also presents Jesus five times counseling others to pray, either through direct advice or through parables (11:5-13; 18:1; 18:9-14; 21:36; 22:40). Consequently, prayer plays a major role in the Gospel of Luke.

It cannot be objected that these instances of Jesus at prayer were simply the additions of the early Church, for as Jeremias notes, this would not have been possible without a firmly established tradition in the early Church concerning Jesus' prayer in solitude.

Looking at the traditions presented in the Gospels we can distinguish four aspects of the prayer of Jesus: (a) God as "Abba," (b) prayer as personal discernment, (c) prayers of petition, and (d) prayers of thanksgiving.

GOD AS "ABBA"

As a result of the prodigious scholarly research of Jeremias we know that Jesus' use of the familiar "abba" in his prayer to God is most significant of his unique relationship with the Father. The Aramaic word *abba* originally came from the speech of

children. The child first learning to speak would say "abba," in the colloquial sense of "daddy," much as an English-speaking child's first words are "mamma" and "dada." "Abba" was the familiar word used by a child to address his father, and though it is true that by the pre-Christian period the word had been extended as a polite form of address to old men and carried the broader meaning "father," its familial origin was universally understood.

Jeremias, who has surveyed all the prayer literature of ancient Judaism, states unequivocally that nowhere in this immense body of literature is the invocation of God as "Abba" to be found. Moreover, neither was the term "my father" used as a personal address to God in all the literature of ancient Palestinian Judaism nor was the word "father" even used as a common designation for God in the Judaism of the time of Jesus. For the Jews, God was too sacred a being for them even to consider referring to him in such a familiar fashion.

And yet all five strata of the gospel tradition show unhesitatingly that Jesus not only habitually referred to God as "father," 170 times in the Gospels, but that he also continually addressed God as "my father," and that in so doing he used the familiar Aramaic form "abba."

"Abba" was then, Jeremias concludes, the *ipsissima vox Jesu*, revealing the unique Sonship of Jesus and expressing the ultimate source of his mission and authority. It means that Jesus spoke in his prayer to God intimately, calling him "Abba," "my father," using the familial language of a child to his father, something no other Jew would have dreamed of doing.

Jesus in the Lord's Prayer authorized his disciples to repeat the word "Abba" after him, giving them a unique share in his sonship and enabling them to speak to God in his own highly personal way. This privilege was esteemed and jealously guarded by the early Church (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6).

PRAYER AS PERSONAL DISCERNMENT

We have mentioned before Jesus' total concern with doing the will of God. Yet the problem must have been for him the

same one Christians face today, that is, discovering just what God's will is. It is most probable that Jesus as man discerned both God's will for him and consequently his own vocation as Messiah through his own intense personal prayer. Such a hypothesis can be supported by evidence from the Gospels.

Two important events mark the beginning of Jesus' public life and both have to do with prayer and experiences in prayer. The first is his baptism by John, after which all three Synoptics report that Jesus experienced some kind of a theophany, including a special election by God and the descent of the Spirit. The significance of Luke's account is that he alone situates the experience as occurring during prayer: "And when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened. . ." (3:21). The baptism of Jesus is simply mentioned as following upon the baptism of the people; it is his prayer that is stressed, and of course, the following theophany.

Secondly, immediately after this, the Synoptics describe Jesus as being led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days and nights. The narratives are more concerned with the temptations, but like the periods of time before the beginning of their public ministries spent by Moses in Midian and Paul in Arabia (Paul alludes to a mystical experience which most probably took place during this time in 2 Corinthians 12:1-7), the suggestion is naturally that this was for Jesus a kind of retreat, a period of prayer and reflection, and as the Evangelists make clear, a period of temptations and fastings.

Furthermore, Luke's narrative is bracketed by references to the Spirit; Jesus, "full of the Holy Spirit," was led by the Spirit into the wilderness (4:1-2) and at the end of the forty days returns "in the power of the Spirit into Galilee" (4:14), suggesting that the time in the desert was one of a very special experience of the Spirit, the result of which was the beginning of his public ministry which immediately follows. Thus the ministry of Jesus begins out of the experience of prayer.

The Gospels often report of Jesus going off by himself to pray, early in the morning (Mark 1:36) or in the evening and throughout the night (Mark 6:47). Yet again it is Luke who

situates these times of more intense personal prayer as occurring before decisive events in his life. Early in his ministry, as his reputation is growing, he is confronted by the Jewish establishment (universally represented in 5:17) because of his claim in the cure of a paralytic to have the power to forgive sins. The story of the cure, the claim, and the confrontation is introduced by a summary statement connecting this cure with an earlier one: "But so much more the report went abroad concerning him; and great multitudes gathered to hear and to be healed of their infirmities. But he withdrew to the wilderness and prayed" (5:15-16).

What Luke has done here is to indicate that Jesus spent time in prayer before an important decision and accompanying salvific action, the forgiveness of sins, an action which turns from this time on in Luke's gospel the judgment of established Judaism against Jesus.

Prior to Jesus' choosing of the twelve, Luke twice indicates that Jesus prayed, stressing the fact that he spent the whole night in prayer: "In these days he went out into the hills to pray; and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles" (6:12-13).

Here a period of intense personal prayer precedes another important salvific decision, this one with profound consequences for the life of the Church.

One of the most revealing reports of the prayer of Jesus is the story of the Transfiguration. Here again, as at his baptism, it is clear that Jesus undergoes some kind of religious experience during his prayer; here again Luke twice mentions that Jesus was praying and situates the experience within the prayer:

Now about eight days after these sayings [the first prophecy of the passion] he took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his countenance was altered, and his raiment became dazzling white. And behold, two men talked with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure [*exodos*], which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem (9:28-32).

Two things should be noted in this account. First, that the experience in prayer is both revelatory and messianic in charac-

ter. This is clear both from the discussion of his "departure" [*exodos*], and from the figures of Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets, the sacred literature and tradition of Israel in which the passion and glorification of the messiah are foretold.

Secondly, the experience marks a turning point both in Jesus' life and in Luke's Gospel. From this point forward Jesus begins and pursues the oft-remarked upon "journey to Jerusalem" which structures the second half of Luke's Gospel and culminates in Jesus' messianic glorification in Jerusalem, his death, resurrection, and ascension.

Other significant events in the life of Jesus are also set off by prayer in Luke. Peter's profession of faith (9:18) follows upon Jesus' praying alone, though in the presence of his disciples. Luke situates the giving of the Lord's Prayer by having the disciples ask Jesus, who has just finished a period of prayer, to teach them also to pray (11:1 ff.). The prayer of Jesus in the garden shows us Jesus resolving intense inner conflict through prayer; here he reveals both his own fear of the agonies of his passion and his complete desire to do the will of his Father (22:41-44). His prayer at the moment of his death marks his complete and total surrender to the Father in which his life and prayer become one (23:46).

PRAYERS OF PETITION

Jesus certainly believed in the efficacy of prayers of petition, both for personal help and on behalf of others. Luke quotes him as saying "And I tell you, ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (11:9). In another parable Jesus tells the disciples that they "ought always to pray and not lose heart" (18:1).

He himself counseled his disciples to pray for deliverance from temptation, both in the Lord's prayer (Matt. 6:13) and in the agony in the garden. In Luke's account Jesus twice urges the apostles present to pray that they "may not enter into temptation"; thus Luke brackets Jesus' own struggle with a double instruction (22:40, 46).

Jesus also prays for others, for Peter's perseverance (Luke 23:31), and for his executioners (Luke 23:34). He urges the

Cross and Crown

disciples to pray that God will send more "laborers into the harvest" (Matt. 9:37-38). One of the most beautiful examples of Jesus' prayer for others is John's free reconstruction of the great priestly prayer at the last supper (John, chap. 17). Finally Jesus also prays for himself (John 12:27-28).

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING

Jesus' prayers of thanksgiving are further models both of his own piety and of Christian prayer. Luke represents him as giving thanks to God in his success, as when the seventy-two return rejoicing in their exercise of the ministry in power (10:21-22) and Matthew describes him thanking God even in spite of his failures (11:25-27). He thanks God for hearing his own prayer in John 11:41-42. Last of all, before instituting the Eucharist he prays a prayer of thanksgiving (Luke 22:17 ff.).

CONCLUSION

In examining the piety of Jesus we have seen that as a man he was a person who had thoroughly prepared himself for his ministry by the study of the religious tradition of his people; that his life was one of complete and total openness and obedience to the will of God, which he discerned through the matrix of a life of prayer and expressed in his life and ultimate death. And in his mission to Israel he died a failure.

His values, faithfulness, obedience, prayer, surrender are rarely the values of modern secular man. Man today is too autonomous, too pragmatic, too secular; he is interested not in failure, but in success. There is at least here a paradox. Modern religious man—if indeed that term has yet any meaning—is at a crossroads. And so also is the Church.

Perhaps the clue is to be found in the piety of Jesus. Perhaps also the greatest lesson that here emerges is precisely one of success through failure, or in terms more scriptural, of life through death. Because he did succeed, for Son though he was, "he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him." (Heb. 5:8-9).

NOTE

1 *Commonweal*, 12 June 1970.