

AUTHOR'S NOTE

These essays and addresses on the Liturgy were not merely composed in a monastic cell in order to be placed silently in the hands of a reader. Apart from two of the chapters that were written specifically at the request of magazines, everything in this book has been delivered to, and in some cases discussed with, a group or congregation.

The reader must obviously expect certain changes of tone and tempo, depending on when the matter was delivered, and to whom. The audience has varied from theological and philosophical students to Cistercian Novices and the Monastic Community of which the author is a member. A few chapters will bear the mark of identification imposed by the group to which they were given (for instance, *The Sacrament of Advent in St. Bernard*—to students of Patristic theology in 1952—and no effort was made to change the character of this theological conference). Most of them, however, are contemporary, universal and, one hopes, cogent.

The more recent articles are, obviously, the ones that come closer to saying what the author really wants to say. Three in particular represent most articulately his current concerns, *The Liturgy and Spiritual Personalism*; *Easter, The New Life*; and *The Good Samaritan*. These may prove to be controversial

sections of a book that nowhere lays claim to a merely safe and conventional piety.

A final chapter takes stock of the current renewal in Liturgy and the conflicts it has aroused.

Abbey of Gethsemani, Kentucky
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“IN SILENTIO”

A Note on Monastic Prayer

“In the beginning,” says Genesis, “the earth was void and empty and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God moved over the waters. And God said: *Be light made!* and light was made.”

In these mysterious words which tell of the world’s first beginnings, the Fathers of the Church also saw a symbolic expression of spiritual creation, and of the beginning of spiritual life in intelligent beings made to contemplate God. The spirit of man is a natural void that waits for the Spirit of God, a deep space that remains chaos until the creative Spirit of God hovers over it, and until perfect light is poured into its transparent depths by the presence of the Word, awakening man to spiritual freedom.

As soon as Adam, our first Father, came into being, these spiritual depths were filled and illuminated by the presence of God. Knowing at once that God was his Father, Adam also saw, by the same act, that the “light was good,” and “divided light from darkness,” order from chaos, freedom from compulsion and slavery. He knew the real from the unreal. He knew his own identity, as a spirit who had come from the

creative hand of God, and lived in God, and was destined to plunge by His freedom into the infinite depths of the divine light. In this recognition, he also knew every other truth that pertained to him as a son of God. He did not therefore need to know evil, because evil did not pertain to him. The son of God need not know evil, since God, his Father, does not know evil. Nor is there any need for freedom to know what does not perfect it—and (moral, spiritual) evil is a corruption and frustration of freedom.

But when the first man spontaneously chose to experience evil and committed his freedom to an illusion, he immersed his light in darkness. His soul became a void, an abyss, a nothingness, and night descended upon the depths of his spirit. Yet in the darkness he remained famished for light, in chaos his spirit still thirsted for order and peace, and in his nonentity he could not help but to aspire to being, to spiritual liberty, to a true identity. And so man cried out for the light from which he had fled. And the Spirit of God hovered over him. But who could understand this hovering? Were these the wings of a protector or of an avenger? Was God friend or enemy? The Laws He gave to men, out of the bosom of His impenetrable hiddenness, offered no satisfactory answer.

In the fullness of time, God willed to reveal His answer to this question. He willed to show His kindness and mercy to men. He would prove that He had never ceased to love His wayward son. And to make this evident, He Himself came to seek the son who was unable to return to Him. So God sent His own Light, His Word, His only-begotten Son into the world created by Him. Thus once again He divided the light from the darkness, and recovered what was His own.

When Jesus descended into the waters of the Jordan, the Spirit of God once again moved over the waters and there was a new creation. The darkness that brooded over the face of the abyss, the image of God in man's soul, was once again dispelled. And the Spirit, hovering not only over the waters but precisely over the Son of God as He emerged from the

purified waters, made all men hear the voice of the invisible Father speaking from heaven: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). What happened then? Immediately Jesus was led by the same Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

Here, in the symbolic language of divine actions recorded in Scripture, we have the meaning of the word "vocation" and especially of the monastic vocation. The monastic vocation is a spiritual charism, a call to a life of consecration, trial, solitary combat, of obedience to the Holy Spirit in an eschatological battle between light and darkness. The monk too, baptized and sealed with the Spirit of Promise, imitates the Patriarchs, the Prophets, and Jesus Himself in a desert-life, renouncing the world of men, their concerns and their ambitions, not in order to affirm and perfect himself spiritually, but in order to serve God by submitting to trial and purification, that his inmost freedom may be perfected in truth.

The monk is a man of paradise who consecrates himself to God by a solemn and perpetual vow in order to spend his entire life in cultivating the spiritual Eden, the "new creation" of space and light marvellously effected by God through the Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection of His Son. The monk is one who, by penance and austerity, solitude, silence, renunciation, keeps himself from forgetting that the earth of his soul is "void and empty." By prayer and faith and contemplation, he preserves the "face of the abyss" which is his soul, from the illusory lights of merely human wisdom, and entering with Christ into the desert, struggles with the evil that is in the world by reason of man's sin. As Adam once received the task of cultivating Paradise and keeping it, so now the monk, strengthened by the invisible presence of Christ, takes upon himself the apparently hopeless task of cultivating the desert—the sandy wastes of the human spirit deprived of God. The Spirit hovers over the wasteland, to bring it fertility, and the Word again pitches His tent in man's world.

The monastic vocation is therefore by its very nature a call to the wilderness, because it is a call to live in hope. The monk carries on the long tradition of waiting and hoping, the long Advent of the patriarchs and prophets: an Advent which prolongs our expectation even though the Savior has come. For though Jesus has saved the world, the fruitful waters of those four rivers of Paradise, once more made accessible by the Cross, have not yet been poured out on all mankind. Even in the souls of the baptized, there is still so much that is unfruitful, so much darkness, so much emptiness, so much barren rock. The monk leaves the world, retires to the wilderness, the forest, the mountains, the lonely shores of the sea: and there, descending by his prayer into the empty spaces of his own spirit, he waits for the fulfillment of the divine promises: "The land that was desolate and impassable shall be glad, and the wilderness shall rejoice and shall flourish like the lily" (Isaias 35:1).

The monk is a man of sorrow, a man discontented with every illusion, aware of his own poverty, impatient of evasion, who seeks the naked realities that only the desert can reveal. But the monk is also a man of joy, a man at peace with the emptiness of the wilderness, glad of his limitations, loving reality as he finds it, and therefore secure in his humility. He is a man of joy and a man of sorrow both together because he is a man of desires. And because he lives by pure hope, he has entered into the secret which Christ has taught His chosen ones: that hope gives us, even on earth, the secure possession of our inestimable heritage as sons of God. What is this inheritance, and what is this possession? It is the wisdom by which we find God in the Mystery of His Christ. It is the wisdom given by His Spirit to those who have left all things to follow Him—the wisdom of the Cross. By this wisdom, the eyes of our mind are enlightened not with speculative science but with the obscure existential knowledge begotten of love, whose eyes penetrate the inner meaning of the hope that is offered to us in the Cross of Christ. This gift of loving wisdom

whose very poverty endows it with vision to penetrate the mystery of God, is what St. Paul calls "the spirit of wisdom and revelation in deep knowledge of Him . . . so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, and what the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe" (Ephesians 1:17-19).

This wisdom is no esoteric secret that can be discovered by strange and arduous techniques. It cannot be won by ascetic macerations. It cannot be learned by man's intelligence alone. It is hidden in God, for no one knows Who God really is except God, and those to whom He reveals Himself.

This wisdom which (as the prophet says) the "giants could not discover," and which the angelic spirits cannot claim as their own acquisition, is more hidden than the veins of iron and gold which have their secret beginnings in the deep recesses of the earth. The source of wisdom, from which all men desire to drink (for all men desire happiness, and wisdom is man's happiness), cannot be discovered by the rod of the diviner. Who shall tell a man the way to this hidden fountain, springing up from beyond the inmost essence of things?

"The depth said: it is not in me and the sea saith, it is not with me . . . It is hid from the eyes of all the living and the fowls of the air know it not. Death and destruction have said: with our ears we have heard the fame thereof" (Job 28:14; 21:22).

And yet, paradoxically, this wisdom cries out in the streets, and waits for men, calling to them and beckoning in the gates of the city and in the market place. But men pass by without finding wisdom. For in order to find her they must hide her commandments in their heart (Proverbs 2:1) by "keeping" them. For that is what it means, to "keep" a commandment. It means not only to remember it, but to make it part of one's own being by doing what it says.

The wisdom of God, which is spoken by the apostles "in a mystery," is a wisdom which is hidden, but revealed by the

Spirit of God. And the Spirit Himself is hidden. Nor is His voice heard with the ears.

No escape from paradox: Wisdom manifests itself, and is yet hidden. The more it hides, the more it is manifest, and the more it is manifest the more it is hidden. For God is known when He is apprehended as unknown, and He is heard when we realize that we do not know the sound of His voice. The words He utters are words full of silence, and they are bait to draw us into silence. The truths He manifests are full of hiddenness, and their function is to hide us, with themselves, in God from whom they proceed. If we hide the precepts of His wisdom in our heart—precepts of humility, meekness, charity, renunciation, faith, prayer—they themselves will hide us in Him. For the values which these virtues communicate to us, the life which they give to us, are completely hidden from the eyes of men. They bring us to the source of a life that is unknown to the natural wisdom of man, and yet from this source Man's nature itself proceeds, is nourished and is sustained. Thus the hidden things that are communicated to us in the words and precepts of the Gospel transform our lives and raise them from the level of distinct knowledge and clear evidence, natural prudence and plain practicality, to another level which is hidden and obscure to the mind of man.

What is the effect of this hiddenness? To some it seems like ignorance and despair. But to those whose vocation it is, this silence of God is a *docta ignorantia*, a learned ignorance, and a "despair" that is the mask of perfect hope. Hope, too, is hidden in silence.

To be ravished from the world of men by the silence of God means, in the end, not that one finds a new and mysterious universe to live in, but that the old, ordinary universe, with all its everyday poverty and charm, while remaining perfectly ordinary, perfectly real, perfectly poor, becomes transfigured from within by a silence which is the supreme and infinite "poverty" of an infinitely rich and generous God!

Formed by the discipline of a hidden wisdom, monks become themselves as hidden as wisdom is herself. They remain in this mortal life, and yet their life is already hidden with Christ in God and their citizenship is in heaven. They do not expect to be understood by men because they do not fully understand themselves. They realize that their silence is something of a problem and a scandal to those who happen to notice it: but they cannot fully explain the mystery to anyone. They are, themselves, too much a part of the mystery of silence to be able to formulate an apologetic for their own lives. Like wisdom, they manifest themselves by remaining hidden.

That is why it is very important to remember that the monk, the solitary, cannot clearly explain himself to the rest of the world, and he is very foolish if he attempts to do so. What a tragedy for a monk to expound what he conceives to be a clear, definite, easily understandable explanation for his monastic life, for his vocation to be hidden in God! That means he has made the mistake of convincing himself that he understands the mystery of his vocation. Does he really understand? Then there is no more mystery! And if there is no more mystery, are we not perhaps forced to say there is no longer any vocation?

What is the monastic vocation? The monk is called to enter into the hiddenness and the silence of God. Does he think he knows what that means? Perhaps in the beginning, if he does not exactly think he already knows all about his vocation, he assumes he soon will. But understanding the monastic vocation is not a mere matter of absorbing what has been written about it in books, even by the saints. Words are only the threshold of the mystery, and the silence of God's love, selecting a soul for this strange life hidden in Himself, is too vast an ocean to be lapped up by the human tongue.

And so, even though every monk remembers from his novitiate the concepts and the explanations that seem to "contain" the meaning of his vocation, as life goes on, and as he

enters more deeply into his vocation, he realizes that he is far out of his depth, and that he can no longer be firmly supported by any concept or formula, however traditional, however sacred. If he cannot even explain it to himself, how can he explain it to others?

The monastic life cannot be defined by any one of its parts. It cannot be reduced to one of its aspects, any more than the life of any living organism can be fully explained by one of the vital functions which that organism performs. Man is a rational animal, they say. But he does not exist merely in order to grow, or eat, or work, or think, or even to love. On the contrary, growth, nutrition, work, thought and love all unite in promoting and increasing the existential depth of that mysterious reality which is the individual person, a concrete, free, inexplicable being endowed with powers whose depth no mind but God's can ever fathom. The human person, then, is a free being created with capacities that can only be fulfilled by the vision of an unknown God. And the monk is a person who has been unable to resist the need to seek this unknown God in the hiddenness and silence of His own inscrutable wisdom.

All the substance of the monastic vocation, therefore, is buried in the silence where God and the soul meet, not as object and subject, but as "one Spirit." The very essence of monasticism is hidden in the existential darkness of life itself. And life is inexplicable, irreducible to systematic terms. It is only understood by being lived. The best we can say is that the monk is one who goes out to the frontiers of liberty and of existence, seeking the impossible, seeking the vision which no man can see without dying. And yet this idea must immediately be corrected, for it is at once exaggerated and misleading. For when the monk is able to reach a certain degree of wisdom, he realizes that he had already found God by becoming mysteriously unwise. And then the circle is closed, and the monastic life begins.

The terrible human aspiration that reaches out over the abyss is calmed. The terror of God is so far beyond all conceivable terror that it ceases to terrify and then suddenly becomes friendly. Then, at last, begins the utterly unbelievable consolation, the consolation into which we enter through the door of an apparent despair: the deep conviction, as impossible to explain as it is to resist, that in the depths of our uselessness and futility we are one with God. "He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit." We have found Him in the abyss of our own poverty—not in a horrible night, not in a tragic immolation, but simply in the ordinary uninteresting actuality of our own everyday life.

Then, in the deep silence, wisdom begins to sing her unending, sunlit, inexpressible song: the private song she sings to the solitary soul. It is his own song and hers—the unique, irreplaceable song that each soul sings for himself with the unknown Spirit, as he sits on the doorstep of his own being, the place where his existence opens out into the abyss of God's nameless, limitless freedom. It is the song that each one of us must sing, the song of grace that God has composed Himself, that He may sing it within us. It is the song of His mercy for *us*, which, if we do not listen to it, will never be sung. And if we do not join with God in singing this song, we will never be fully real: for it is the song of our own life welling up like a stream out of the very heart of God's creative and redemptive love.

Now each man's individual song, that he sings in secret with the Spirit of God, blends also in secret with the unheard notes of every other individual song. The voices of all the men who love God, the living and the dead, those who are on earth, those who suffer in the place of probation, those who have gone into the place of victory and rest: these voices all form a great choir whose music is heard only in the depths of silence, because it is more silent than the silence itself.

[1955]