

Prayer In Action

by Don Giuseppe, SC

Prayer is not an escape from direct involvement with the many needs and pains of our world. Prayer challenges us to be fully aware of the world in which we live and to present it with all its needs and pains to God. It is this compassionate prayer that calls for compassionate action. We, as disciples of Christ, are called to follow the Lord not only into the desert and on the mountain to pray, but also into the valley of tears, where help is needed, and onto the cross where humanity is in agony, suffering and dying.

Prayer and action, therefore, are not contradictory. Prayer without action can grow into sterile pietism. Action without prayer may deteriorate into questionable activism. If prayer leads us into a deeper unity with the compassionate Christ, it will always blossom into concrete acts of service. And if concrete acts of service do, indeed, lead us into a deeper solidarity with the poor, the hungry, the sick, the dying, and the oppressed, these acts will always thrive with prayer. In prayer we meet Christ, and in him all human suffering. In service we meet people, and in them the suffering Christ.

Mother Theresa was a woman of prayer and her prayer was expressed by the action of which we all are aware. John Paul II is a man of action. His encounters in the world with the weak and the strong, the rich and the poor, the athlete and the handicapped, the newborn and the dying, have shaped him into a man of deep prayer so strong as to influence the whole Church and, in fact, all the believers in the world. Blessed Louis Guanella opened his heart to the world with his homes and his prayer. "The whole world is your homeland," he used to say and also added: "prayer is the bread of the souls" and the church is "our paradise on earth."

As a young priest, I was assigned, in Sicily, to assist another confrere in establishing a parish in a neighborhood made up of an assembled population of homeless, refugees, gypsies, and other people escaping from all sorts of miseries and crime. The church, built some ten years earlier, without doors or windows, has been reduced to a garbage dump. We slept in the attic with the pigeons and the rats.

My "pastor" used to get up at four every morning and spend the next two hours in front of the Blessed Sacrament. At six a.m., he rang the bell to call the people for Mass. This was also a sign for me to get up. Through him, I began to understand the deeper meaning of the words: "I am the good shepherd who gives his life for his sheep."



The discipline of patience reveals itself not only in the way we pray but also in the way we act. Our actions, like our prayer, must be an indication of God's compassionate presence in the midst of our world. Patient actions are actions through which the healing, consoling, comforting, reconciling, and unifying love of God can touch the heart of humanity. They are actions through which the fullness of time can show itself and God's justice and peace can guide our world. They are actions by which good news is brought to the poor, liberty to the prisoners, new sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and God's year of favor is proclaimed (Lk 4:18-19). They are actions removing the fear, suspicion, and power hungry competition which cause escalating arms races. These same actions denounce an increasing gap between the wealthy and the poor, and an unprecedented cruelty between the powerful and the powerless. They are actions leading people to listen to each other, speak with each other, and heal each other's wounds. In short, they are actions based on a faith that knows God's presence in our lives and wants this presence to be felt by individuals, communities, societies, and nations.

Patient action is a hard discipline. Often, our lives get so overwhelmed that it takes every bit of energy to survive the day. Then it becomes hard to assess the present moment, and we can only dream about a future where time and place will be different. We want to move away from the present moment as quickly as possible and create a new situation in which our hurts and present pains are gone. But such impatient action prevents us from recognizing the possibilities of the moment and we may easily become intolerant or even fanatics. Action as a discipline of compassion requires the willingness to respond to the very concrete needs of the moment. Only then will we become true witnesses, in the world, of the compassionate love of the Father for all, especially for the poor. ·

(Credit: Don Giuseppe. "Prayer In Action" *Now and at the Hour* April-May. 2001: 14.)