

SHORT WRITINGS FROM TAIZÉ

21

Brother Pierre-Yves

Toward God, in God

Three Itineraries for Meditation

Introduction

How to prepare oneself for inward prayer following a pathway which is already prayer?

That is the topic of the first of these itineraries, which proposes one possible form.

What God am I conscious of seeking and invoking?

The second of these itineraries tackles this question in a meditation about God.

What role can memory play in helping me get free of an inner distress?

The third of these itineraries attempts to offer a reply to that question.

Each of these itineraries is deliberately brief, a kind of sketch without any claim to be comprehensive.

FIRST ITINERARY

In the following pages we are going to propose a pathway for prayer, possible stages in a meditation in preparation for *oratio* (inward prayer) and already pregnant with it. Our starting-point will be a series of little words we use, often without even noticing them, to speak and above all to think. These words here are linked by a spiritual logic – *for, from, toward, by, in, before, with*.

For you, Lord God

I want this moment that I am setting aside to be truly for you, gratuitously, not turning in on myself, not seeking sensations, not putting myself forward. Truly for you, in a gratitude that has no ulterior motive, in considered praise, in search of what pleases you. But of course that gratuity cannot be so “pure” that I remain foreign to it, as if absenting myself, disengaging myself personally. For it is not possible to please you without doing everything one can to find one’s pleasure in you. You do not wish to be isolated, you do not conceive of yourself without us, you are communion, the offer of a covenant. Your joy supposes ours.

Yet it really is for you that I am here, attentive (if possible) to your presence alone. “Yours alone be the glory,” as Johann Sebastian Bach used to repeat. For you, and that assumes a certain self-forgetting, a letting go of self, emerging from myself, from all that brings me back to

myself. Above all in an awareness that you are All; I am not your limit, nor are you mine. You know no limits; it is within yourself that you make room for our existence, our freedom, our responsibility. You are all, you do not need us, yet you value us, our response, our presence responding to your own. It is as though really you insisted on needing our love in order to be truly yourself.

There is in me a desire to give you all of myself, at least in this short moment of time I have set aside for you. Yet I do not easily dispose of all of myself; I do the best I can to gather it together and offer it to you. It is to indicate that desire that I focus it in this moment consecrated to you – for you, the sun of my life, the root of my origin, the horizon of my progress on earth and the lovely beyond, shining bright on that horizon.

I owe you everything, and as a result I owe you myself, you, the source of my life. I realize that you have created me, not so much “for you” as “toward you” (St. Augustine says *ad te*), invited to become a partner in your tremendous project of creation and re-creation. That is why I wish to be for you, very particularly in this moment as I seek your presence, simply, with no other plan, no other idea, and if possible no other care.

From you, Lord God

How can I wish myself for you if I do not first acknowledge that I am from you? True, it is my own initiative to pray, desire, seek you; but all that is born of your

initiative. You always seek us first, call us first, desire us first. You arrive first at the rendezvous we call prayer. Even more radically, you have taken the initiative of my very existence, which began on earth but goes further, much further.

Everything come to us from you, and I come from you. You never stop calling me through what exists, through events and my way of experiencing them, giving them meaning. Likewise through the events related in the first of the Testaments and the words of the prophets that echo them; through the human life and the words of your Messiah; and more mysteriously still through the inward witness of your Holy Spirit, by whom the historical presence of Christ is prolonged after his resurrection.

Unlike those who say you are absent, and those who try to justify that absence, unlike the impression we might have of a passivity, a *laissez-faire* on your part, I have to discern your active presence in my life, and above all in my prayer. Then, going on from there (more difficult, this), I have to sense that presence in the world. It does not seem obvious, since you are not of this creation. Apparently you do not intervene directly, or more precisely you do not intervene as we expect, as we would go about it ourselves. Should we then conclude that you are neither present nor active in your own way? Let us think that, normally, except for miracles, you do not intervene behind events to bring them about, to use or change them; instead, you are ahead, drawing history, my own and the world's, toward its coming fulfilment, generally without our knowing how. Nonetheless, we

sing, “All exists in him” (Colossians 1:17). And as the apostle Paul says of the Father, “All is from him, by him and in him” (Romans 11:36).

Toward you, Lord God

Because everything comes from God and he himself comes to us, would that be a reason for me to wait passively for him? As if to say: it’s up to him to come! Obviously not. We have already seen that my nature as creature of God means being toward God. Jesus passed through human history in order to become our passage in God, our Passover. “Raised up from the earth,” he draws all to himself (John 12:32). May I, then, O God, let myself be so drawn that I may go to you in response to your coming toward us!

Thus my prayer, united with that of Jesus and included in his mediation, intends to be a movement toward you, God, a dynamism drawing me onward. The movement evokes a spiritual adventure, a shift outside of myself (yet not without myself!), a risk requiring a certain audacity, that of faith, since the result cannot be known in advance. We advance through unknown territory, with perhaps a certain fear of the void, vertigo before the abyss since, in some ways, you represent a land always still to be discovered. Will I succeed in finding you, meeting you, or will I wander on through trackless wastes?

That will not be achieved without great attention, an intense concentration of the spirit, a deep interiority, to say nothing of a great patience in order to return as

often as necessary from wandering lack of attention. So will I manage all that by my own means and a good will that I more or less possess? No, of course not. This is where a new preposition appears:

By you, Lord God

Not that you do the work in my place. You do not take my place instead of me, rather you give my place to me, leaving me all my responsibility. Only you, by your Holy Spirit, can act with me and in me in such a way as to take nothing away from my freedom, but on the contrary founding and deploying it. Far from infantilizing me in the slightest degree, you want me as adult as possible. It is therefore by you, thanks to you, that I come to you, and it is truly I who come.

You take me by the hand, like Jesus, when Peter, terrified by the waves, began to sink; by your counsel the Spirit comes within my will. So it is, Father, that you take me into your glory (Psalm 73:22). I am amazed and comforted: you have joined with me in the search for your face.

That is of the greatest importance. Thanks to your accompanying, as I advance toward you by you, I discover you more clearly, I know you better, and that helps me avoid seeking the wrong God. You are not the God I always risk imagining, made in my own image, reducing you to the scale of what I can understand; you unceasingly draw me to yourself beyond any figuration of you that I might be tempted to stop with. In the end, my

quest begins with your coming to me and moves toward you who await and escort me. For since you are all, my movement toward you is not exterior to you.

This approach to God might already be considered a fully valid goal in itself: seeking him ever further, ever more deeply, ever more mysteriously. Yet that is not all, for the aim is to arrive somewhere, at least temporarily, a point of rest, even if that cannot last in this life and in this world.

In you, Lord God

We go to God in order to find ourselves in him, discover ourselves in him. He is communion, within himself first of all, and that is what he invites us to. So here I am, Lord, to be with you, so close that it is within yourself that you place me; so close that your will and mine tend to become one. Saint Paul explains that the Spirit becomes so inward to our desire, in prayer, “in groans too deep for words” – not formulating our prayer for us but inspiring it from within – that God, sounding our hearts, discovers there his own desire expressed by the Spirit. (Romans 8:26).

As I go to you and by you, I am received into your communion and I discover that as something essentially dynamic. You, Father, withdraw somewhat, for you have entrusted everything to your Son and your Spirit, so that I am delicately received by those two hands. Your Son has been your face turned toward us, and he remains for ever that human face in which I have to decipher your

mystery. In addition he has transmitted to us his Spirit which is also your Spirit, by whom you live in me. And both Son and Spirit bring us into yourself, Father, as their source. In that way I am truly inserted into your trinitarian mystery.

All these successive thoughts prove necessary in order to bring about unity within myself and to bring me to God, the real God. But, once in that communion with him, the time has come to go beyond the succession of images and reflections, allowing myself to be brought by him beyond words and thoughts. The time has come to set free and simplify my mind, letting love take over. The time has come, in *oratio* (inner prayer), to hold myself in God, if possible without images and without reasoning, in a pure burst of affection sustained by faith, by all that is most radical and most simple in faith. That involves at the same time rest for the mind, an inner peace and silence, a certain degree of passivity, and an extreme concentration, but without the will being over-taut.

Before you, Lord God

Unless a person has a particular gift or a long practice of *oratio*, it seems difficult to stay long in this kind of suspension of the mind, this very deep experience of communion with God. But rather than suddenly emerge from it with a sense of regret, maybe, or a sense of failure, it is possible for me to remain before you, Lord God, to remain present to your presence, turned toward

you who remain turned toward me. We are back in the world of images and ideas, but now they are rarefied, reduced to the bare essential.

Such a presence is of the order of a kind of wisdom, issuing from the wisdom of God. In the Latin used by our fathers in the faith, wisdom is connected with savouring (*sapientia / sapor*). Without seeking myself in it, I am enabled at times to savour your presence, Lord God. That is not only authorized but I am encouraged to practise it as a way of honouring you, giving you thanks, savouring symbolically your communion.

With all who seek you, Lord God

No matter how alone I may be in *oratio*, how deep the night, how deep the silence, they are invisibly inhabited by all those who are likewise in search of you, to say nothing of the great cloud of witnesses who await us beside you, unable to achieve perfection without us (Hebrews 11:40). Theirs is a silent, discreet presence that, far from disturbing my intimacy with you, sustains and deepens it. How could I meet you while forgetting your friends or ignoring them? How could I fail to situate myself, with humility and an infinite gratitude, in their fraternal communion on earth and in heaven? How could I not wish to participate in their prayer and their love? How could I ever minimize this measureless dimension of your grace?

The preceding lines are only a proposition. The reader, using these prepositions or others, in this order or another, is invited to create a personal pathway leading to prayer and already initiating it.

SECOND ITINERARY

When you say “God” who are you thinking of, who are you talking to? It is worth asking the question.

More often than we care to admit, when we pray, we find ourselves saying words, or reading them, without really thinking what we are saying, our minds elsewhere. It can also be the case that we are really attentive to the words spoken, without being very conscious of the One to whom they are addressed. We say “Lord” but the sense remains vague, we do not even specify whether we are speaking to the Father, or Jesus, or the Holy Spirit, lacking in respect for what revelation tells us.

In the following pages we will try to evoke a journey in and toward God’s inwardness. We know that no term defines, no name really suits him. He is always infinitely beyond all we can think or imagine; beyond any representation, he slips from our grasp, dwells in inaccessible light (1 Timothy 6:16). Yet we cannot think of him, love him, address him without having within ourselves a certain mental image of him, and without using terms, chosen with the greatest care, that speak of him and help us speak to him. They will always be approximate, symbolic in the sense that, being part of our human, earthly language, they point toward an inexpressible elsewhere; they do not enclose a meaning, they point toward it.

It is less difficult to address Jesus, since the gospels show him with a face, that of a man we can even try to depict, by drawing or painting. Yet we have to join him in his eternal divinity, in the inexpressible reality of his

resurrection, and in his universal mediation, since he is the Head in whom are unified and recapitulated the whole of humanity and all creation in their immensity.

When it comes to God, we are less helped to start with. The term “God” in itself and by itself seems not to mean or say much; it is very general and too often used in every sense. On the other hand, if I say, “my God,” or “our God,” in addressing him, that changes everything. Or perhaps, “the God of our fathers,” with all that that implies of faithfulness on his part. Or even “the God of the covenant,” which evokes the eternal project for which God has immersed himself in history since the creation until the Kingdom, what St. Paul calls “the mystery.”

In order to be able to think of God and love him, the Old Testament, the Psalms especially, offer us a number of very concrete references, images that are often partial, manifestly inadequate and of a symbolism that is the more effective for being unfamiliar.

Rock

One image for God that recurs frequently is the “rock,” suggesting stability, solidity, a refuge in times of need. Refuge if the surrounding plain is flooded, refuge if one is being chased by a bull... A rock on which someone caught in quicksands can find a foothold. The image is completed by these words from a Psalm: “Lead me up onto the rock that is too high for me” (Psalm 61:3), something which proves full of meaning for anyone

engaged in rock-climbing who is confronted with a passage too difficult for him. When it proves impossible to advance or go back, what is to be done? What a relief, between two handholds, to be able to count on the help of a taut, well-anchored rope.

What can be more solid, more present, less questionable than a rock? As an image of God, it expresses perfectly his presence and reality. God is not a matter of ideas or abstractions; he is more real than I and my existence are.

“Blessed be the Lord, my Rock! He trains my hands for the fight.... My companion he is, and my defence, my stronghold, the One who can save, my shield in whom I can trust” (Psalm 144:1). All those images suppose that the protection in question does not involve flight or passivity on my part, but a mobilization, a confrontation.

Love

In addition, God is called “my love” in both senses of the expression: he loves me and I love him. This is, of course, a very much broader and deeper theme. It must also be said that the word “love” is used so often and in such a variety of senses that it does not always have much impact. It is helpful to find additional harmonics: God as sun, or God “my portion and my cup; you are my happiness” (Psalm 16:5, 2), God “my light and my defence” (Psalm 27:1). Such expressions render God infinitely dear to us, so that with one Psalm we might dare to say, “Your love is more precious than life” (Psalm

63:4), than my own life, that is, and God only knows how fond I am of my life....

Face

Certain images fail to indicate any mutual, interpersonal relationship. We are then helped by the many texts that refer to God’s “face” or (in an older style) God’s “countenance.” This term suggests strongly that God is looking attentively at me, and also that I want him to look at me. If I seek God’s face, it is because my heart has heard the call, “Seek my face” and I am then led to ask him not to hide his face from me (Psalm 27:8f). Here we find a theme expressing fully the reciprocity of grace and faith; the presence is fully reciprocal.

Father

This is the central theme, one that comes mainly from Jesus, the name “Father.” In the Old Testament, God is sometimes the Father of his people and the Father of the king, as in Egyptian culture. In the New Testament, God is essentially the Father of Jesus, then by reason of our communion with Jesus the Father of each one, in so far as we confess the mystery of Christ, his divinity and his humanity, and are determined to do the will of God as Jesus reveals it.

Obviously, if this term for God means something to us, that must begin with the psychological experience of our earthly father, including the ambiguities caused

by the limits and possible disorders of our relationship with our parents. But God's fatherhood regarding us is not the projection, even idealized, of an earthly father. That is the danger of the name. In reality the perspective has to be completely reversed. It is the fatherhood of God, as lived by Jesus, that establishes, patterns and symbolizes all human paternity and gives it its name.

Jesus teaches us to say, with him, "Our Father in heaven," but what mainly reveals this Father is the way Jesus was son in his incarnation. A generous father, a prodigal one, even, who tells his children (one who violently demands freedom, one who is overwhelmed with fear of him, both distrusting him and suspecting him of being a despot), "All that is mine is yours" (Luke 15:31). In the same sense, Jesus says to his Father: "All that is mine is yours and all that is yours is mine, and I am glorified in them" (John 17:10). In them, since they are associated with his mission, that of a father so trusting and kind that he has given his whole work of creation and re-creation to his son and, in a manner of speaking, to each of us and all of us.

Jesus also teaches us what should be asked for from our Father in heaven – at the end come bread, cancellation of our debts so long as we do the same for others, his protection in temptations and when confronted with evil. But first and foremost come things to be asked for for God, which engage us deeply – the sanctification of his name, the coming now and soon of his Kingdom, the doing of his will.

Moreover, if our relationship with the Father makes of us his children and the brethren of Jesus, that rela-

tionship automatically opens onto something beyond. Jesus terms "friends" those to whom he reveals the plans of his Father (John 15:15). That shows to what extent, far from treating us with condescension like little children, God, full of trust, associates us with that great plan and counts on our trust in him.

This name "Father" does not offer itself to us as a definition placing God in some way at our disposition. It too is approximate and symbolic, pointing toward what cannot be expressed, an inaccessible light. When it comes to the names that seem the most obvious, "God" or "Father", we have to be extremely cautious, using them with discretion and sobriety, remaining astonished at having them at our disposal, and therefore taking care not to use them too readily.

I am

Certainly, God reveals himself to us as a "person." But we have to be careful. For us, inevitably, a person is a human person since we know no other; it means myself and those around me. The term is not therefore false when applied to God, but inadequate; it is a symbolic metaphor opening onto something beyond a meaning that is, for us, much too concrete, too subjective, too immediate, too limited. Certainly, Jesus became a human person, but the Father did not. On the other hand, it would be extremely damaging to imagine, in order to avoid this disparity in a rational, critical perspective, an impersonal God reduced to a first principle,

a driving force, contained for example within the evolutions of the creation....

When God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush, he gave as his name “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14). Thus God is an “I” who addresses me as “you”. Now “I” expresses a self-awareness, a will, a freedom. He is the bearer of a project which he is bringing to its completion; he intends to establish with each of us a deeply personal alliance, that of a Father with sons and daughters as adult as possible, of a Creator with partners, of a Lord who shows himself as servant of all while remaining responsible for them, with the authority proper to a creating, saving, and therefore liberating love. Could love ever be anything other than utterly personal?

Besides, since God names himself “I am,” that also means clearly that he “is.” Becoming aware of that sets off our reflection in new directions.

Being

In considering these ways of addressing God, we have moved from the most remote to the closest. It is time to make one more important step. For the name of Father, if we measure to some degree its mystery, brings us very close to God, into a profound knowledge of his face (which is reflected in the face of Christ). And in this knowledge we come close to the very being of God. The Epistle to the Hebrews refers to Christ as being “the seal of his being.” A seal, printed in wax, reproduces there its own image exactly, and the image here is that of God’s

own being. If we speak of God’s being, and above all when we speak of God as Being, in whom are unified and transcended all that is real, we are situating this knowledge in relationship with the objectivity of the world and its history – and in that sense with something more objective than the theme of paternity.

In my experience of ambient reality and of myself, I am necessarily in search of what is, and therefore of its being. I question its unity, which strikes me as a necessity; yet I only perceive aspects, disconnected parts (what philosophers refer to as “beings”). And that occurs against the backdrop of another kind of experience, that of non-being – my limits, death, loss. I experience myself, then, as lacking in being. I aspire toward what can serve to establish a basis for reality, and in it my own reality. And it is suggested that I should recognize that basis in God, who is Being in its source and emergence, Being in its transcendence, beyond all knowledge, in which neither past nor future exist, immutable, eternal Being, present everywhere, filling all, containing all, renewing all; Being in its most focused, in its heart.

Now in all that, nothing is fixed, nothing is static. God, with his Word and his Spirit, is indeed the one in whom all “live, move, and have being” (Acts 17:28). If we think of him having the stability of a rock we must at the same time think of him as having the liveliness of a breeze. He reveals himself essentially as the Living One and in so doing as the One Who Is, as Being.

Might these be considered abstractions? They are not, for, in any case, I experience intimately the being that I

am, the being in which I participate, the universe I am part of. Then prayer allows me to tell God: You are, in all your transcendence and your immensity, the basis and horizon of my being as you are of the whole universe. And it is in transcendent guise that you prove to be immanence, intimacy in the depths of the most intimate part of myself. In you “we live, we move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28); in you I am, in you I exist, and in you I say “I”, I am a person, for your Being is Person and love; or in other words: Love is your being, highly personal.

It is of considerable importance to be able to say: the God of my faith, my Father in heaven, is also the God of reality, the Being of all. At the same time I have to stress that his Being is for me a mystery, since I only have access to fragments of being, and they do not allow me to deduce intellectually what Being is in its mystery.

Saint Paul has no doubts about this: the God whom my faith allows me to know, recognize, and love, is the same as the one whose existence the creation first enables me to discern. “Since the creation of the world the invisible (the Creator) has been clearly seen by the intelligence through his works” (Romans 1:20). This is an initial revelation of God, inchoative, still waiting to become clearer and deeper, to become personal. Now as we pass in prayer from the fatherhood of God to God as Being, as we have been suggesting, the initial knowledge of God, that we have termed inchoative, attains its culmination through this spiritual itinerary: God as all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28). And that means, first of all, all in me, all in us; and also I, or we, all in him.

THIRD ITINERARY

From memory to memory

The starting point this time is a distress accompanied by a feeling of having been abandoned, of crying out but receiving no reply, of waiting and waiting to no effect. It can happen then that facile distractions appear, that we allow ourselves some kind of low-level consolation, finding an escape in things that are less than essential. But I refuse that, in the name of a more demanding spirituality. I am waiting for something different.

First, my memory intervenes, by way of a meditation on what the presence of the Lord can represent in a human existence. But here the memory of God only leads to a renewed lament, its only effect is to intensify an inner sense of failure, an upset that even prevents one sleeping, a slope leading to despair. It seems that the memory was too centered on myself and my distress, that it was imprisoning me inside myself.

This memory, still vague, grows sharper in the stage that follows. We recall days gone by, years spent in communion with the Lord, when we used to wake in the night recalling the songs and praises that came rising up in our hearts and voices. Here too the memory takes on the form of a meditation, which becomes a question. Has the Lord changed, then, perhaps for ever? Is his love limited, his word exhausted? He was once only

welcoming; has he now begun to reject? He was the promise of forgiveness; has he now given over to wrath? Has his openness been replaced by closedness? All those questions tend to one conclusion – the right hand of the Lord is not the same as before.

But entering a third stage, the memory perseveres in spite of everything. It is determined to delve further into the past and be less subjective. Beyond my personal feelings and impressions, it begins to meditate on all that the Lord has done for his people, for his Church, all the great deeds that provoked such wonder. Thus standing back, it becomes possible to see the outlines of a way of holiness, sense the greatness of God in the usual discretion of his way of being present to his people. Instead of comparing the works of God with what we would do in his place, faith deciphers the way God works, a way which is neither intervening power nor weak surrender, but something else, something of the order of mystery.

In Jewish tradition, the memory goes back in history to focus on the founding event, the liberation through the crossing of the Red Sea. All the rest of history is interpreted in the light of that. For Christians, their faith focuses on what is their founding event, the Passover of Christ, his death and resurrection, announced and symbolized by the crossing of the Red Sea, preceded by the passing of God in the midst of his people. Christ has passed through the great waters of death at the head of his people, from Adam and Eve down to the very last believers in history, to lead them to his Father. This founding event is extremely personal to me by reason of my baptism; it offers itself as the viewpoint from which

to interpret in hope everything that happens in my life. The approach is less subjective than before, but not less personal – personal and communitarian.

Thus memory has, step by step, gained the victory of faith and hope over feelings of distress and the temptation of despair; that victory is that of Easter morning.

– In these pages may be recognized a paraphrase of Psalm 77.

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