# Prayer, a journey

*Words of Spirituality*
by ENZO BIANCHI
The goal of this journey and this relationship is the conformity of our human life to the image of God, Jesus Christ

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“There is no labor greater than prayer.” How many young monks in the desert received this response from the elder or abba they had questioned. And the difficulty remains as time passes, though it assumes different nuances. Every generation, and each person in every generation, has the task of gathering together the legacy of prayer handed down to him or her and redefining it - and one can only redefine prayer if one prays! It is difficult today to understand the definition of prayer as an ‘elevation of the soul to God’ that has traversed both the Christian East and West. After Auschwitz, many have asked whether it is still possible to pray at all. I think that the response to this question should not be limited to replacing the title given to God since the beginning, ‘Omnipotent,’ with the title ‘Impotent’ (there are those who speak of the ‘all-weakness’ - omni-impotentia - of God). It seems to me that if we do this, we remain within the logic of theodicy. Instead, if we take seriously the fact that many at Auschwitz, as in so many other living hells, died praying, I think we can understand prayer as the believer’s journey toward his or her God - or better, as his or her awareness of this journey. Christian prayer thus becomes the space in which our images of God are purified. It implies the difficult daily struggle of leaving behind our manufactured images of God in order to draw nearer to the God revealed in the crucified and risen Christ, the true image of God given to humanity.

If prayer is dialogue between God and a human being, a dialogue that implies the act of listening to the divine Word contained in Scripture and a human response (a response that that also implies responsibility), we can also see it as a journey that awakens the person who prays to the dimension of communion, with God and with others. Prayer becomes our adaptation to the environment of the divine, life lived in the presence of God and with God, and a relationship with God. In prayer our heart - in other words, the center of who we are - is focused on the One who speaks to us and calls us, and we are de-centered from ourselves and and leave ourselves behind in the ‘ecstasy’ (ek-stasis) of meeting and knowing the Lord. This is how prayer happens: it is the believer’s constant, unending journey toward his or her God, a God we never know completely when we begin, but with whom we have a relationship that becomes during the course of our life and our personal experience. This relationship never reaches a point of complete fulfillment, because prayer is a search for the face of God - the unceasing, insistent search of one who has been taken possession of by a Presence, even if the person who prays may never be able to find words to explain the ineffable experience that made him or her a believer. Prayer, then, is an awareness of Christian life as a journey towards God: a God who is invisible and silent, but whose invisibility and silence are those of the Father. God is not absent; he is the Present One who conceals his presence in silence. He is the Father who, through his concealment and silence, makes his presence a call, a vocation. In this way prayer, a form of communication with One who remains silent and whom we do not see, releases our freedom and our human expression, allowing us to answer God’s call and leading us toward knowledge of ourselves as we are led in our search for God.

Our prayer to God is our answer to the prayer God addresses to us. We enter this dialogue with everything we are: as human beings we are longing, question, desire, relationship...and prayer expresses all of these dimensions, as thanksgiving, invocation, intercession, request....The ‘guideline’ for Christian prayer is the

prayer of Jesus, the Son of God. In his own prayer Jesus experienced the non-fulfillment of the critical moment of Gethsemani, when he asked the Father to “let this hour” pass him by so that he might be spared the cup of bitterness, but he continued to abandon everything to the fulfillment of God’s will, not his own. Prayer is not an exaltation of human desire, a request that God do our will, but rather the journey through which we come to recognize and accept God’s will. Our knowledge of God continues to deepen, and our relationship with God changes as a consequence of what we know. Experience reveals that a person’s experience of prayer changes over time. It is only by changing that prayer can continue to be a genuine relationship with God, a relationship that does not atrophy but remains living. The goal of this journey and this relationship is the conformity of our human life to the image of God, Jesus Christ.

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