

A Resounding Note of Love

Some thoughts on intercession

At Fellowship conferences, I am constantly exhorting members to write for *Forerunner* about things that interest them. This summer, realising that I was failing to take my own advice and in the hope of encouraging other contributions, I have decided to share something which grew out of my very first contact with the Fellowship: the 1992 study weekend in London.

That first evening, someone asked me what I did, and when I told her I was a psychotherapist, she asked me straight out if I prayed for my clients. Although I didn't fully realise it at the time, this was a very interesting question (to which, incidentally, my answer was, 'Yes'). However, my companion was more attuned to its implications, and it soon became clear that she did not find my answer particularly reassuring. Her position was that of someone who respected prayer as something which could bring unknown and risky dimensions to a relationship. In therapy, where relationship itself is the basis of the work of healing, prayer might be introducing something way beyond the expectations of clients.

Ever since, I have been grateful for that conversation. It formed the basis of my subsequent M.Sc. research project. More importantly, it has continued to press up against my practice as a therapist, and to inform the way in which, as an Orthodox Christian, I think about my work. I have decided to write a little about it here partly because of the debt I owe to the Fellowship on this account. Also, although I have discussed it with therapists and counsellors of various religious backgrounds (including Orthodox), it bears on the question I constantly hear from Orthodox Christians in all walks of life: 'How do we integrate our lives as Orthodox, prayer, the sacraments, the beauty of the Liturgy, fasting and so on, with our lives in a secular non-believing world?'

Now it seems to me that for some people this integration comes as naturally as breathing, and for them this may seem an odd preoccupation. For others, however, it is always a matter of concern. We experience in church and receive in reading and study a tradition of prayer handed down to us from great ascetics living in an age far removed from our own. This tradition touches us, seduces us, declares its beauty and reality in our hearts, and also challenges us to incarnate its truth in everyday lives where it can appear strange, cultic and irrelevant - at best a harmless obsession, at worst a withdrawal from what is perceived as 'reality'. The challenge offered at dinner that evening was a powerful one to any of us Orthodox as to how prayer affects our lives in the world. It was particularly intriguing to me since psychotherapy, like prayer, is about relationship, and it led me to ask questions about how these ways of relating relate to each other.

Putting the question in context

What psychotherapists and counsellors do (I use the words interchangeably) is to spend time with people - individuals, couples, sometimes groups - to address difficulties in their lives. The focus may be a specific problem, or an event or crisis such as illness, bereavement or a problematic marriage, or it may be a search for meaning triggered by anything from a generalised dissatisfaction to a breakdown in mental health. There is a general consensus among researchers that the most effective element in all this is the relationship between counsellor and client. I sometimes wonder if what we are doing in the privacy of our consulting rooms (which tends to come under fire as being self-indulgent and out of contact with society) has something in common with the project of the Desert Fathers - not to retreat from society but to find an answer to society in terms of godly relationships.[1]

In the training of therapists there are many different approaches, but they probably amount to three core skills: learning to hold back and not impose your own views on others, so they can find their own solutions; developing empathy, that is the ability to get inside the other person's frame of reference and understand what they are feeling, so that they become more able to acknowledge feelings and deal with them; and being able to talk honestly about what is going on between you,

both the positives and negatives. There are features in common with spiritual direction. Where they differ is in a commitment in therapy to non-directiveness, and the lack of any assumption of a shared faith (though in practice people often seek out therapists with whom they feel they will have some common ground in these matters). The process of therapy involves a great deal of trust on both sides, and there are ethical codes to guard against the abuse of this trust on the part of the therapist.

So, when I put the question about prayer to colleagues, not all responses were as straightforward as my own had been. Some indeed said 'Yes... I go to church... light candles ... always pray before/after a session', etc, but others found it difficult and unsettling. One said, 'It makes me very twitchy to talk about praying for clients - but I do think about them prayerfully.' There were many other responses, including curiosity, mystification and disapproval.

Eventually I found a dozen or so counsellors who did pray and who were willing to talk at length about what this meant in relation to their work. They told stories, discussed anxieties, expressed gratitude and delight for the gift of prayer, and generally gave the impression that underlying their work was a huge life-giving resource rarely talked about and certainly not touched upon in most trainings. What I hope to do here is to relate some of what I learned back to the experience of living as an Orthodox Christian in twentieth-century western society.

One thing is needful

As Orthodox Christians we are rich in traditions of prayer: the Liturgy and other sacraments, the offices, icons, the Jesus prayer, ascetic endeavour. Although the external forms may vary, we are taught that one thing matters: to stand with the mind in the heart before God. In my experience this is something easily misunderstood as private and exclusive. Yet in reading about it, a curious dynamic always seems to be present - a powerful call to be one's own unique self and only that self in the presence of God, and simultaneously an equally strong imperative to love and serve one's fellow human beings. Prayer at the expense of love, we are told again and again, is meaningless. In opening our hearts to God we are called to open them to the whole of humanity and indeed creation. Life itself becomes sacramental. Thus prayer is at once intensely personal and totally communal; it cannot be one without the other. Echoes of this fact are found in the counselling world: Carl Rogers, the father of person-centred counselling, said that when in therapy we arrive at what is most intimately personal we are also at the point of what is most universal. To me it makes no sense to exclude anyone from prayer since prayer is a fact of being; the difficulty for us humans is in paying attention to it.

It is also in the ways of paying attention to it that some of the anxieties my questioner had in mind may arise, questions which relate to what is going on when any of us prays for someone else, as we so often promise, and indeed try to do. What I hope to do here is lay out a few of them as problematics - ongoing knotty problems which we are unlikely actually to solve, but which we have to grapple with daily in our personal relationships with each other and with God.

May the Lord God remember in His Kingdom....

What does it mean to pray for someone else? It is quite difficult to find direct advice on this in the Fathers, yet intercession forms a major part in all our services, and it is natural to ask each other to pray for us and people we love. The Fathers exhort us to make peace with our fellows, triumph over our hatred and other passions: prayer is turned constantly into praxis in relationships, and only as a last resort, it seems are we to 'take the other person into our prayer' - 'pray for him sincerely, without speaking ill of him to anyone'.^[2] Doing this seems to involve coming alongside that person in prayer, sharing the hour of trial, and laying aside one's own feelings and needs.

When we pray for people in church we generally ask for two things - mercy and remembrance (and in the case of the departed, remission of sins). The litanies are both inclusive and generalised, making room for our personal concerns without imposing them on others and gathering them together into communal prayer. I take this to involve a kind of standing back, making room in the

heart for personal attention to the need and suffering of another, and also for their place in the Kingdom.

When we are close to people this is often difficult to do, as the Fathers understood. It is well known that intimacy of any kind breaks down our psychological defences, opening the way for angels and demons. It is also all too easy to find ourselves thinking we know what is right for someone else, and for our own agendas to cut across another person's path. At such times we may invoke God as fixer, judge (of oneself or others) or as alternative companion. For example a young man I knew was in deep distress about his difficulty in forming personal relationships and wanted to die in order that he could then help God to put the world to rights. This may be an extreme reaction, but often when we pray for someone we have ideas about what will make life better for them (and ourselves) and only increase our frustration that things are not working out that way. One counsellor spoke of working with a woman whose image of God was so punitive that she could do nothing but reject Him. He longed for her to experience God's love and to have the necessary help to find it. When his prayer was not answered in this way, he came to believe that in handing it to God in prayer, 'somewhere down the line God would reveal himself', and was able to let go of his desire to control the situation.

Several of the people I have spoken with describe a journey from the nursery slopes where intercession may be about pleading ('please do this for so-and-so'), or bargaining ('if you do this I'll...'), or even telling God what is right ('please don't let this happen, it's too cruel'), to intercession which is more contemplative, at the same time more concentrated and more diffuse - what Irina Ratushinskaya, writing amidst the horrors of imprisonment in the Soviet camps, called 'a resounding note of love'.^[3]

Sometimes when we reach an impasse in a situation or relationship, the greatest difficulty is to lay aside our own pain sufficiently to let be. This form of the so-called 'inner martyrdom' may occur when we are anxious to help someone, and have to come to terms with the fact that this may not be possible, a situation where to take on the authentic path of the other may be a particular strain because, in the words of an addiction counsellor, 'you are sort of eager beaver, and you are asking God to direct you, but you are dealing with another human being'. Thus for him, acceptance of the otherness of the other (the client) in his or her own relationship to God was crucial.

Other people emphasised their intention to be a channel of healing for others, and the importance of prayer in this: for example, 'I can be quite concrete and literal in prayer sometimes about unclogging all the clogged up channels in me.' This was said by a counsellor working in a hospital chaplaincy who specifically set up times and places to pray for her clients. Another spoke of a similar process, but described it as going on during her sessions with clients, a kind of praying for them which she was working to reconcile with her stance as a non-directive counsellor. She said it was hard to occupy both grounds together, but that what ultimately she was trying to do was to bring her awareness of the situation into her awareness of God's presence, and try to hold the two together: 'If I can get it tied up in me, it's tied up out there somewhere and the whole thing is flowing better'.

One thing the counselling world has tried to put back into society, which has sadly lost it, is the value of shared silence. I was intrigued recently to read that in the Egyptian desert of the fifth century it was part of the code of deportment for young novices to sit with a visitor for an hour of reverent silence after the first greeting.^[4] In my time as a therapist, I have only spent one completely silent (fifty-minute) session - but the following week the client said it was the most useful she had had! It is my own experience of being distressed that another person who can sit it out attentively rather than solving or intervening allows for a movement of the Spirit more precious than any merely human solution. We are extremely fortunate if we have such people among our friends, priests, doctors. As part of the training I do with ordinands, I get them to sit with each other in pairs, in silence, for five minutes, one partner concentrating on his or her own mood, the other totally attentive. They often refer back to this as both a totally new experience and a useful one.

One colleague, who although he works in a Christian Counselling Service refuses to pray aloud with clients because it raises false expectations, described prayerful attention like this: 'There's a practical reality, something that works... someone who's not got their own agenda or anxiety and is coming in to sort you out... someone who is just comfortable to sit with and let things happen in their own time... so I suppose I think of prayer as hard work, but as no work at all. There's balance, but also a struggle to maintain that balance.'

Everyday life, of course, does not provide many such opportunities, at least in the physical presence of those we are praying for, though perhaps that is unimportant. Non-religious therapists I have talked with have found it difficult to understand what I might mean by praying as opposed to the everyday practice of psychotherapy, though an Orthodox colleague pointed out we might do our clients more good if we forgot about the therapy and concentrated on prayer. Some of those who do pray struggled with what the difference might be between thinking about a person in a disciplined way and praying for them. A Jewish therapist talked about how her clients would 'enter her thoughts' during the service, and although she found it difficult to say whether thinking about them at this time was praying for them she said that probably a level of prayer had been reached when 'something kind of moves - something clears'. Like one of her Christian colleagues, she seemed to be positing a reality - a possibility of grace - beyond what conscious effort could achieve. This, perhaps, begins to open up the element of risk involved in praying for others.

Risky relationships

Wherever we trust and are trusted there is always a possibility that the trust will be betrayed. Where there are also external, contractual responsibilities a caregiver can feel under attack on the level of 'Am I good enough?' which can get in the way of the process. One colleague described this as follows: 'It's just so hairy, so difficult, that I need to use my head and I actually need to think very carefully about what's going on... and that can be to the disadvantage of that bit that flows like the river underneath. And I might be so busy making or holding things that I can't use what feels to me like the creative source.'

Her phraseology reminded me of Theophan the Recluse, and his reference to prayer which will 'begin to flow of its own accord, like a brook that murmurs in the heart',^[5] and I could identify with her frustration in finding her own efforts getting in the way of accessing it.

One tension that is perplexing to the late twentieth-century western brain is that between conscious effort and receptivity to grace. There seems to be a complicated relationship between being able to work on our emotions and becoming free of them. The Fathers constantly tell us to smite the passions with the name of Jesus, and not to encourage them by engaging in dialogue with them, yet in practice letting go of personal emotions also seems to require substantial working through. At the same time, our own efforts are insufficient in themselves. A colleague described how she had struggled a long time trying to forgive a family member with whom there had been a bitter argument. She had felt real and powerful anger, and expressed it in therapy, and it had not gone. She also offered that anger in prayer, and had what she called 'a most extraordinary experience' because it went. She was anxious to impress on me that she had not as a result become 'nice' or 'super-spiritual' in that relationship. The anger was still around, but what she called 'the vengeful, hostile quality in it' totally went. What she experienced was different from getting in touch with it, it was offering it to God for healing. Yet did the process of getting in touch with it make it possible to offer it?

Another colleague talked about a relationship with a client which she did not believe she would have survived without prayer, even though her supervisor thought that this was nonsense. Although she had been able to understand a great deal of testing out and suicide threats at a theoretical level, she said that at the level of her own emotions the only way she had come through had been because of it being contained by God, by prayer. At times when she felt unable to go on, she had found herself supported by the fact that whatever happened the whole situation was in God's hands, and this had enabled her to accept her own limitations - thus, in her view, becoming more useful to the person concerned.

At the same time, the risk in prayer, as Metropolitan Anthony has frequently reminded us, is that we enter into a relationship where we cannot control the outcome, and where we open ourselves to new knowledge and new responsibilities. Most of us have no idea of that when we start.

Lord I have cried unto Thee, hear me

For many people prayer begins from a moment of crisis or distress. This was certainly true in my own case when years of defensive atheism crumbled before the death of my father and a friend's terminal cancer the following year. Just as relationships can knock down the walls of the ego, so can events which are too much for the structures we have created for them.

A woman working with a young alcoholic described to me how she 'found herself praying' out of a sense of total powerlessness. Every time anyone tried to help him he sabotaged it. 'For him', as she put it, 'help was poison'. Although she described herself as a 'pre-establishment Christian' she was in the habit of going into church to pray on her way home, and it was here that she found the prayer itself taking over, and herself admitting her complete helplessness in a cry from the heart: 'Nobody can help this boy - maybe you can'. At the time of our conversation he had been nine months in a rehabilitation unit and was doing well; a cycle had been broken, and although she and others had done everything they could, she was convinced that it was not their help which had achieved this since help offered in any human way was 'poisonous to his whole system'.

Several other people described situations where they came up against moments in their work which they simply did not know how to deal with. The only possible response was prayer. This might be anything from an internal 'I think we need help here...' to 'I'm really scared', or a conscious attempt to 'contact a deeper level of wisdom'. Sometimes this would result simply in the therapist feeling calmer and more able to contain the situation. At others they might find they had something to say which moved things on. In any case prayer was considered an essential resource

The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit

For some people, it seems, it is a quite straightforward matter that they feel better when they pray, although there may be long periods of time when they feel unable or unwilling to do so. It is in prayer that many people process pain and come to terms with past and present difficulties. It is inherent in the Russian tradition of spirituality that the path of suffering brings us closer to God, and this was borne out by a colleague who works with victims of torture. 'Although,' she said, 'they say 'Where was God?' and are very angry about it, they also know that what they touched was beyond and was something that belonged to parts of themselves that is not definable in physiological or psychological terms'.

Part of the paradox of Christianity is how we move towards the light 'from glory to glory', and at the same time find courage to do this without bypassing the dark. The search for healing carries the implicit assumption that suffering is abnormal and unnecessary, yet at the same time the greatest threat to finding our true relationship with God is not so much that we might experience suffering as that we might defend ourselves against it. Yet suffering for its own sake is in no way on the agenda. The body and soul are to be redeemed with the spirit, and, according to Theophan the Recluse, it is 'the sins of the flesh and not the body itself, that is mortified'. No asceticism is for its own sake, but to bring the body into the Kingdom through rediscovery of the natural human will conformed to the will of God. If it fails to contribute to that, it is worthless.

Basil the Great and Maximus, as well as other Church Fathers, often remind us that it is natural for human beings to love each other. A surfeit of suffering and abuse build up a hardness of heart which makes it difficult for us to do this, and turns us into ways that are unnatural and set apart from God. A counsellor in a Christian counselling organisation told me about a young woman who had been raped, and who reached a point where she refused to pray about it. If she did so, she feared that she would be changed, and lose her hatred of men which was essential to her sense of herself as a person. In due course this woman did become able to pray again, and her prayer was that she would

be able to hand the judgement over to God. Eventually she said that she had let this situation go and was free of it. This seemed to me an example of turning suffering into something creative.

'Creative suffering' is a phrase used by Julia de Beausobre, a Russian Christian who was imprisoned by the Soviet authorities in the thirties. In her account of the imprisonment, *The Woman Who Could Not Die*, she talks about the knot or node of suffering that is formed when one person torments another. Loving relationships, she suggests, exist in harmonious parallel, but where suffering is inflicted a life crashes across another, and this node of suffering remains as a fact in the cosmos until some solution is found. Entering into our own grievances through prayer, or into another's suffering can surely contribute to such resolutions as the Fathers suggest, but it may still take us into further problems about how to respond to what we discover.

Keep your mind in hell and despair not

What we do with knowledge, or how we respond to it, is a key question in relationships. In the film *Priest*, a girl tells a young Catholic priest during confession that she is being sexually abused by her father. Bound by the seal of the confessional, the priest can only, ultimately, pray, and then has to face the anger of the girl's mother when she discovers the truth. 'How could you have known, and done nothing?' Actually, the priest has not done nothing. He has tried, without betraying the confidence, to alert the girl's teachers to the fact that there might be problems, and he has suffered greatly over the burden of knowledge and the father's abuse of the confessional to taunt him with it. As portrayed in the film, it is during his struggles with God in prayer that the mother comes unexpectedly home and discovers what is going on.

We are surely not called upon to stand by and ignore suffering when it is in our power to do anything to prevent it. But surely there is a difference between doing nothing (ignoring) and maintaining a costly awareness through prayer, that may mean having to hold back from any kind of intervention, either because this will not be in the other's best interests, or because there is simply nothing effective we are in a position to do. Surely it has to be better to wait at the foot of the cross than to run away? And if so, is there a language in which to explain this to someone who thinks you are wasting your time or ignoring the problem? Is there anything the priest in the film could say to the mother that would be helpful?

In Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, the protagonist Raskolnikov dreams of a brutal beating to death of a mare by her owner and an excited mob. In the dream he is watching as a small boy, out with his father. The small boy is appalled, and his father tries to hurry him on and tells him not to look. But the boy rushes in to the scene, and when the horse is dead he throws himself onto her and kisses her before attacking the owner 'with his little fists'. Finally his father catches up with him and snatches him away. The dream ends with the child crying convulsively while his father tries to tell him it is none of their business. The father is naturally protective in a situation which is hopeless, yet the child is right: the situation is their business even if they are helpless in it, and his child's innocence proclaims this. It reminds me of a salutary moment when I was walking past a church in North Oxford with my daughter who must have been about three at the time. Outside this church is a large - more than lifesize - crucifix, which, in its very familiarity, made no impression on me whatsoever. My daughter, however, wanted to know what it was, and when I told her, asked with real distress and horror, 'Why would anyone want to do that to someone?'

The interesting point about Raskolnikov's dream, of course, is that since it is his dream all the characters belong in some sense to him - the victimised mare, the brutal owner, the mob, the uncaring crowd, the harrassed and protective father - as well as the innocent child. The Fathers tell us we are to take upon ourselves the condemnation, rather than to judge others, or at least, as St Maximos puts it: 'When misfortune comes upon you do not seek someone to blame but ask why God has seen fit to send you this'. In probing the heart in prayer, we may discover the fragmentation which keeps us from singleness of heart, and find out where we ourselves contribute to the knots of suffering and their continuation.

The struggle itself, however, holds no guarantees, and the fight with despair may be a long and hard one. An addiction counsellor who works daily with intractable problems and constant failures described how these difficulties sometimes leave him open to doubts and questions of such pressure that he can lose any sense of God's sustaining presence. This was extremely frightening for someone who also described prayer as 'the most important, fundamental facility I have as a human being', and confronted him with a terrible struggle with despair.

I will not speak of the mystery to Thine enemies

As I began to explore possibilities behind the question that had been put to me, I came up against a significant difficulty. It was virtually impossible to talk meaningfully about these matters with people who did not themselves have some experience of prayer. It was not that they were dismissive or uninterested, but beyond a superficial level we had no common language, so they were left quite simply mystified. I do not think this is entirely due to a failure on my part to communicate. I think it has more to do with the deeply personal nature of prayer, and it leads me to wonder to what extent these things should be talked about. It is certainly very difficult to do so, and the people with whom I did speak expressed this. While most of them felt quite isolated and welcomed the opportunity to talk some of these things over, they used terms such as 'a great fear... dreading it... sharing something extremely private' about the process of doing so. It is perhaps another paradox of our praying community that none of us prays in isolation and yet each of us can only ultimately pray from the depths of who we individually are. I was impressed by the generosity with which people shared their thoughts and experiences. I also discovered that some people are making very testing and lonely journeys in trying to reconcile their faith with their work, and I suspect this applies in many walks of life: hence the constant questions about integrating Orthodoxy with contemporary society.

In trying to write something for Forerunner, I discovered a further difficulty. When I write about this sort of thing for the counselling world, I write as a professional bringing a particular perspective to bear. In the present context, I write as a lay person, a married woman and mother, working in a context which regards religious activity with suspicion and, increasingly, curiosity (which possibly has a tinge of hope). I wonder what this experience can offer to a world to which I come to learn from those who have devoted themselves to a life of prayer and asceticism in contexts where religious activity is central - where faith, indeed deification, is the project. I suppose that what these two worlds have in common is dedication to the healing of the soul, and for me something is achieved when communication is increased between the worlds of the monastic and the secular, because ultimately they are less far apart than they seem. It leads me to hope that we could perhaps see the problems some of us face about integrating Orthodoxy into our modern lives as positive if they help us to act in some sense as gateways between the deep wisdom passed on to us by our fathers and mothers through the centuries and a world which, as public reaction frequently demonstrates, is not uncaring, but starving.

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Notes:

[1] For an exploration of this theme, see Gerald Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community* (Clarendon Press, 1993)

[2] See for example, Maximus the Confessor, *Centuries on Love*, 4:35

[3] See the poem 'Believe Me' in *Pencil Letter* (Bloodaxe Books, 1986)

[4] See Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, (Columbia University Press, 1988), p.249

[5] *The Art of Prayer*, compiled by Igumen Chariton of Vlalamo, tr. Kadloubovsky and Palmer (Faber and Faber, 1966), p.112.