



**Henri Caffarel, prophète pour notre temps**  
**Colloque International – 8 & 9 Décembre 2017**

## HENRI CAFFAREL, A MASTER OF PRAYER

*Jacques Gauthier*

I met Father Caffarel in the summer of 1973, when I was living with Jean Vanier's *L'Arche* Community in Trosly-Breuil, France. He had come to talk to others who were responsible for communities and prayer groups about the establishment of Charismatic Renewal in France. Small in size, timid and with lively eyes, I was marked by the energetic character of this passionate and rigorous priest whose sole goal was God.

His life can be divided into two main parts. For about thirty years, he devoted himself tirelessly to couples, widows and the Teams of Our Lady. From 1973, he dedicated himself to seekers of God whom he welcomed to the house of prayer in Troussures. He increased the propositions to enable prayer to be better known to all: books, weeks of prayer, talks, correspondence courses, schools of prayer.

And the secret to such richness and productivity? His encounter with Christ in prayer. When he spoke of God and of prayer, he almost always referred to Christ and prayer. In July 1978, he confided to Claude Gourre in the *Panorama Aujourd'hui* magazine, *"If my priesthood has been in any way useful, I know that I owe it to the practice of prayer."* He made a very similar remark to Jacques Chancel during the *Radioscopie* programme of March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1973, *"I attribute really everything in my life to prayer."*

Prayer occupied the first place in his life because Christ did too. From the beginning of his apostolate with couples in 1939 and up until the end of his life, this man of faith spent long hours praying every day, often in front of the Holy Sacrament and he factored into his timetable months when he went on retreat every year. This is how he went about his prayer, according to a witness's remarks, *"Seated on a small prayer bench, his body and head very straight, his eyes often closed, his hands wide open on his knees, perfectly immobile, completely contemplative, completely there and present to God, present right down to the most intimate part of himself. Nothing else counted. One would have said that he was both completely open and welcoming and completely an offering, before his Lord and his God just like a sheet unfolded in the sun, an image that he particularly liked to use when talking about prayer. Nothing soppy or insipid, but a peace, a stability, a strength emanated from him."*<sup>1</sup>

By very simple methods of prayer, he thus entered even more into an intimacy with Christ. He wanted to share this encounter that gave him such *joie de vivre* with others. On March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1973, he revealed to the Responsible Sector Couples of the Teams of Our Lady, *"I could only wish that others too would have this encounter with the living Christ, this discovery that God is love."*

Prayer was an essential necessity for him. He was amazed that so many Christians and couples, all of whom were called to holiness, were unaware of it. He underlined the causes of this ignorance: a decrease in faith and love for God, the Church's distrust of something mystical that confined prayer to the contemplative communities, a lack of formation and training of the clergy and laity as to what constitutes prayer life. He took his inspiration from the Christian spiritual masters, citing Therese of Avila and John of the Cross in his

---

<sup>1</sup> Père Caffarel, *prophète du mariage (Extraits de textes)*, Equipes Notre-Dame, 2008, p. 15.



## **Henri Caffarel, prophète pour notre temps**

### **Colloque International – 8 & 9 Décembre 2017**

writings and retreats. Without his help and example, several clergymen and laity would not have read these Carmelite masters, given that their works seemed difficult to access.

Reflecting on Eastern religions and wisdom, the founder of *L'Anneau d'Or* and *Cahiers sur l'oraison* magazines wondered why young people were so attracted to oriental-style meditation and were so unaware of the great Christian tradition of prayer, also called contemplative prayer. He compensated for these shortcomings by becoming a true 20<sup>th</sup> century master of prayer, a prophet for our times, who knew how to reveal the God of love present within us.

When I was asked to give a talk at this Colloquium on the importance of prayer in Father Caffarel's life, I hesitated given the scope of the subject. Then I accepted, because prayer is equally essential in my life since my encounter with Christ in 1972 and my marriage in 1978. The number of words asked for in this text was insufficient for what I wanted to say. A fire was alive within me, as if the words burned from within. My enthusiasm united with Father Caffarel's when he declared in 1975 in the *Cahiers sur l'oraison*, n° 143, "*Is it possible to consort with Fire without being burnt, to approach Love without burning with love for God and for men? Prayer and charity are connected.*"

An unexpected book was born of this writing experience, *Henri Caffarel Maître d'Oraison*, published by Editions du Cerf. I have taken five characteristics of prayer and five pieces of advice that he gives in the book on how to pray daily. In order to be true to the spirit of the founder of the house of prayer at Troussures, I enjoin you to take two minutes of prayer now. Let us close our eyes, go down into our heart, and there, present before the Presence, let us tell Christ again that we believe in Him and that we love Him.

### **Henri Caffarel's Five Characteristics of Prayer**

In his bestseller, *Being Present to God: Letters on Prayer* (Alba House, 1983), the retreat master defined prayer in this way, "*A profound orientation of the soul, an exchange beyond words that, without neglecting conversation, is made up of something very different, an attention, being present to God with the whole being, body and soul, all the senses being awake.*" (p. 24) For him, prayer was being present to God, an encounter with Christ, a relationship of love, an experience of the heart, an ecclesial act.

#### **Being Present to God**

Prayer is not just a meditation technique that makes us present to ourselves and to the world, but a way of being that enables us to recognise a greater presence in the heart of ourselves; God, who goes before us and who is by our side. Father Caffarel reminded us that prayer time is an experience of faith, where we expose ourselves to God's gaze by having a silent discussion with Him, by letting ourselves be cleansed and transformed by His love.

Something always happens when we pray, even if we do not feel anything. Incidentally the expression "*faire oraison*", (literally 'to do prayer') is ambiguous. The author of *Cinq soirées sur la prière intérieure* (*Five Evenings on Interior Prayer*) does not use it very often. It is more accurate to say that we give ourselves up to prayer, since we go to God for God, just as we are. We do almost nothing, except to be there, offered up to the Lord's mercy, wanting to be attentive to His presence, despite distractions and bleak moments.



## **Henri Caffarel, prophète pour notre temps**

### **Colloque International – 8 & 9 Décembre 2017**

#### **An Encounter with Christ**

Primarily it is not prayer that Father Caffarel was passionate about, it was Christ. He wanted to bring every person to experience a personal encounter with Christ. He alone makes us free and can quench our thirst for certainty. Contemplation, prayer and silence are only the means to reach the end goal of all prayer, which is union with God, an encounter with Christ. It is not a question of emptying your mind, or seeking a sense of emotional wellbeing, but of making, at every moment of prayer, the choice for God through acts of faith, hope and love. It is a question of being in communion with Christ, of getting to know Him more deeply by ceaselessly coming back to the Gospels. *“In prayer, as in any encounter, each of the two people are active. Christ mysteriously introduces us to His thoughts, His feelings, His wishes and transforms us. Man, on the other hand, must strive to listen, understand and answer.”* (*Cinq soirées sur la prière intérieure*, p. 16).

The founder of Troussures used to say that every Christian who loves Christ ought therefore to give themselves up to prayer every day. He gave the people on retreat a text to meditate upon, where Christ says to everyone, *“Love Me, just as you are.”* This text, that you can find in my book, is a good illustration of prayer as an encounter with Christ and a relationship of love.

#### **A Relationship of Love**

For Father Caffarel, prayer was a personal relationship with God made with heartfelt attention, and not a quest for interiority at any price. He invited people to simply look with love at Christ who loves us. It is not complicated or difficult, he reminded us, but just like any relationship of love between people, prayer is a simple and a complex reality. We sit down in silence, we speak to Christ, we love Him, we call on the Holy Spirit, so that He lives and acts more and more in us. It is a question of living faith, nourished by diligent meditation of Scripture and love of our neighbour. We let Christ live and pray in us.

True prayer springs from the heart and it rises within us when we spend the time on it. It is like love, we practise it day after day. The editor of *Cahiers sur l’oraison* warned us. We do not seek daydreams and tranquillity in prayer, we accomplish a gesture of free love for God. And it is our whole life that benefits from it, couples and the whole world too.

#### **An Experience of the Heart**

Prayer is a deep descent into our heart, where the “I want” dwells. Father Caffarel noted that it does not relate to sentiment, but to that spiritual “centre”, that enables us to enter into a relationship with God. To help descend into our heart, he suggested the advice of Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, a humble 17th century Carmelite cook, who recommended descending into one’s self even for a few seconds several times a day to adore the Trinity present in the depths of our heart.

Through prayer, we come back to the heart and we recognise the source of love that makes it beat. In this sense, we can talk about Christian interiority. The more we reach the depths of our heart, the more God is close to our consciousness, if we do not let our “I” be monopolised by all that appeals to it. *“It is only at **that** very cost that we will manage to live at the deepest level, at the level of the “new heart,” both during prayer time and throughout all of the day. A day will come when we will be able to say like the spouse in the Song of Songs, ‘I sleep, but my heart watches’”* (Ct 5:2). (*Cinq soirées sur la prière intérieure*, p. 82).

#### **An Ecclesial Act**

Prayer is not an individualistic act that cuts us off from the world, because it enables us to carry it in our heart and offer it to God. It is not only the contemplation of Christ’s face, but a commitment and nearness



## **Henri Caffarel, prophète pour notre temps**

### **Colloque International – 8 & 9 Décembre 2017**

to people who suffer, according to each person's charism, *"Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it for me."* (Mt 25:40).

Prayer changes the way we see things by enabling us to see the world and the Church with Christ's gaze. It is therefore not a solitary act with God, but an ecclesial act. Father Caffarel used to say, 'My place of prayer is Christ and also the Church'. With him, we join with the immense crowd of our brothers and sisters who are in heaven, on earth, in purgatory, and who make up the Church in its beautiful mystery of the communion of the saints. And this is how prayer prepares us to experience, with the assembly of believers, the great prayer of the Eucharist, *"the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time, it is the font from which all her power flows."* (Vatican II, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum concilium*, 10). In the *Cahiers sur l'oraison*, September-October 1978, Father Caffarel wrote, *"When you pray, try to realise that you are of the Church, in the Church. Be united with all your brothers: may your voice merge with the song of the great choir. The mass is the special moment where Christ and the Church form one to praise the Father."* (p. 166).

### **Five Pieces of Advice on how to Experience Prayer Daily**

The teacher of the Weeks of Prayer gave several pieces of advice on how to pray. I will introduce you to five of them here: wanting to pray, setting a time each day, starting well, inhabiting one's body, connecting with Christ's prayer. Let us note that he did not suggest a particular method. The fruits of prayer, that remain a gift of God, do not depend on a physical posture, a breathing technique or a method of meditation, but on a union with the dead and resurrected Christ. The method, personal to each person, is only a tool to make us receptive to the Lord, to open us to His mercy. With time, we realise that the best method is often not to have one.

#### **Wanting to Pray: Automatic Pilot**

*"Wanting to pray is praying,"* Father Caffarel stated following on from Saint Augustine. During prayer, the important thing is not to be attentive all the time to God, thinking up beautiful thoughts about Him, experiencing nice feelings. No, the essence lies in the wish, in a free orientation of our whole being, to be turned towards God. This interior process is not wilfulness, but requires discipline to watch with God. *"Lord, what I want from this prayer is what You want from it."* The author in *Cinq soirées sur la prière intérieure* wrote that the lucid act of wanting what God wants goes beyond sensations, feelings, distractions, images, ideas that we might feel, *"But then if the essence of prayer does not reside in the constancy of one's attention, nor in the "I feel," nor in the "I think," where then to find it? It is In the "I want", the adherence of my will to God's will. Which means that prayer is not about attention, nor sensitivity, nor intellectual activity. It consists in that orientation that I voluntarily print on "the depth of my heart."* (p. 34).

This "I want" becomes the "automatic pilot" of prayer, an expression that Father Caffarel liked, and that he also called "intention." The intention of giving oneself up unreservedly to God's love in prayer takes control of the whole duration, even if attention to God is not always there. The intention comes from us and commits us to continuing to pray, attention to God is a grace that leads us to taste His silence of love.

#### **Setting a Time Each Day: Knowing how to endure**

Henri Caffarel used to say, *"In prayer, it's Jesus who gets behind the wheel!"* We still need to take the decision to be there every day, at a set time if possible, to concur with this rendez-vous of love. He has all



## **Henri Caffarel, prophète pour notre temps**

### **Colloque International – 8 & 9 Décembre 2017**

the initiative in this heart-to-heart, we must not take His place, but take our own by letting ourselves be freely transformed by His presence. The greatest effort in making in prayer is to not make any. It is enough to be there before the One who is always there, talking to Him with a look, a sigh, the repetition in our head of a brief formula.

The Lord lets us freely choose the place and moment best adapted for prayer, as well as the amount of time to be dedicated to Him. Father Caffarel suggested at least thirty minutes, *“Indeed, time is needed to free oneself from oneself and one’s worries, in order for a deep sense of being, the ‘heart’ to emerge and come into play.”* (*Cinq soirées sur la prière intérieure*, p. 61). The important thing is to “last” with the intention of persevering, as he wrote to a young person who wanted a union with God in prayer, *“If you are sure about enduring, lasting, being courageous in the desert and the night, well then, have faith.”* (*Being present to God*, p. 260).

### **Starting Well: The “I-You” Relationships**

In silent prayer, it is enough to be and to love, and not to have or to do. We may well have the firm intention of praying every day at a set hour and regulating the automatic pilot of our “I want what you want,” but it is important to start well. In the *Cahiers sur l’oraison*, n° 198, November-December 1984, the practitioner gave concrete suggestions, *“Therefore I particularly ask you to be careful of the gestures and attitudes at the beginning of prayers. A genuflection done properly is an act of the soul as much as one of the body; a clear and strong physical attitude of a man awake, present to himself and to God; a sign of the cross, slow, and full of meaning. Slowness and calmness are of great importance to break the hurried and stressed rhythm of a life as busy as yours. A few moments of silence: like slamming on the brakes, they will contribute to introducing you in to a prayer rhythm and bringing about the necessary break with the preceding activities. It can also be useful to recite a prayer aloud, very slowly, softly. Become aware then, not of the presence of God, but of God present: a living person, the Great Living person, who is there, waiting for you, watching you, loving you. He has His own ideas on this prayer that is beginning and asks you to adhere fully to what He wants from it.”* (p. 12-13).

Father Caffarel insisted on establishing an “I-You” relationship with God, that is Christ, from the beginning of the prayer time. The important thing was not to stop the thoughts coming and going, but to turn ourselves towards God in faith and with our whole being, *“Lord, I know that You are expecting me, that You hear me.” “I know that You are looking at me and that You love me.” “Adoration, filial love, the I-You relationship, availability: such are the interior attitudes on which all authentic prayer ought to be based.”* (*Cinq soirées sur la prière intérieure*, p. 63).

### **Inhabiting One’s Body: An Ally and a Support**

What else can we give God during prayer, except our time and love? And how does this express itself if not through the body that supports the elevation of the soul to God? The founder of Teams of Our Lady spoke of the body as a “monstrance of the prayerful soul.” He underlined the importance of the body during prayer in a small brochure he published in 1971. He showed that the bodily attitudes in prayer ought also to be attitudes of wakefulness. The body can help *“the spirit benefit from its vitality, balance and peace. It is up to it to introduce the spirit to relaxation, momentum, abandonment, offering up to God.”* (*Le corps et la prière*, p. 3). Therefore, one needs to collaborate with one’s body so that it is an ally in prayer by giving it a healthy lifestyle: healthy food, sufficient sleep, physical exercise, walks in nature.

The body is not only the actor through whom prayer is expressed, but it is also the motor that gets it started. The bodily posture creates an interior attitude that changes into prayer, hence the importance of being well seated. Admittedly, the ideal position is that where one feels good, meaning one where the



**Henri Caffarel, prophète pour notre temps**  
**Colloque International – 8 & 9 Décembre 2017**

body is relaxed, one that can be held for a long enough time without causing pain and that encourages the spirit's attention. Which is in itself a complete challenge, because stress is everywhere today, and burnout lies in wait for us, all which does not help us inhabit our body. Agitation of the body often leads to agitation of the mind.

**Connecting with Christ's Prayer: Union with God**

What should one do during prayer? Connect with the living prayer that Jesus continues to address to his Father in the deepest parts of our heart. We have to let His prayer overwhelm us, seize us, so that His great praise to the Father springs forth in us. We can connect with Jesus' prayer by repeating His name with love, by slowly saying the Our Father. Our prayer becomes His in the Spirit, it is in us through pure grace since the day of our baptism.

*"It is not so much a question of "doing" prayer than "connecting with/meeting" within ourselves a prayer that it already there, all ready to go. Christian prayer is not primarily a work of man, but the work of God in man. Since the day of your baptism, and from the moment you are in a state of grace, prayer is in you. Admittedly not at the level of sensitivity, nor of feelings, nor of ideas, but even more profoundly, in that intimate zone of your being, in that interior depth where the Holy Spirit lives." (Being present to God, p. 163).*

In the beautiful book dedicated to a mystic, *Camille C. ou l'emprise de Dieu*, with whom he exchanged letters, Father Caffarel showed that prayer enables us to enter into the mystery of love of divine people amongst themselves. It is God who loves Himself in us. Prayer becomes a fundamental movement, *"of returning to God, of attention and presence to God, of momentum towards God. This movement that is nothing other than the theological dynamism received at baptism."* (*Cinq soirées sur la prière intérieure*, p. 89).

I will finish with this prayer inspired by a Tamil hymn that Father Caffarel used to recite sometimes at the end of his talks:

O you, who are at home in the depths of my heart  
I would like to meet you  
in the depths of my heart.

O you, who are at home in the depths of my heart  
Make your voice resound  
In the depths of my heart.

O you, who are at home in the depths of my heart  
Keep me close to you  
In the depths of my heart. Amen."

*(Cinq soirées sur la prière intérieure, p. 90).*