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Coming from the Protestant tradition, as I do, drawing inspiration from the life and spiritual legacy of Francis de Sales, a Catholic saint as well as a leading light in the Counter-Reformation, required me getting over my initial instinctive doctrinal cautions. Yes, Francis prayed the rosary, yes he petitioned Mary, and yes his life's work, in particular as Bishop of Geneva, was primarily about winning Protestants back to the "Mother Church" – a task which he undertook with zeal and great success. However, it becomes quickly evident, on reading into his life's work and his devotional writings, that Francis de Sales acknowledged Jesus Christ as His Saviour, Lord and Friend, loved and served Him wholeheartedly, and laboured with a godly humanity and an exemplary Christian love. He also demonstrated a clear awareness of the need of the Catholic Church to reform much that had fired the Protestant Reformers to rebel in the first place. Protestants tend to tar all Counter-Reformers with a similar brush of ruthless, sometimes cruel, zeal, and assume the Catholic Church in its teachings and practices and the lives of its adherents remained unchanged from the abuses that so provoked the Protestant Reformers in the 16th Century. Francis de Sales was clearly a godly man, Christ-like in his character and authentically Christian in his prayer life and the integrity of his actions.

Both in his life and his writings, he radiates a love for God and his fellow man, especially the poor and the downtrodden, whether believer or unbeliever, and a balance of contemplative prayer and intentional, godly action; so much so that he impressed even leading Protestants. King James I of England, and the Methodist revivalist John Wesley lauded his widely acclaimed "*Introduction to the Devout Life*" published in 1609. A leading contemporary Calvinist said on his death: 'If we honoured any man as a saint,

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I know none more worthy than this man since the days of the Apostles'.¹ A man, to whom were accredited two resuscitations from drowning and cures for blindness and paralysis, surely merits attention and further investigation; a disciple who rose at 4am every morning to meditate, pray and read the Scriptures, fasted on Fridays and Saturdays, and abstained from ostentatious penance, maintained the habit of hourly recalling the Presence of God, and never begrudged time and effort in associating with the people entrusted to his care, especially those who might be considered the less important, deserves our respect.

PRAYER AND ACTION

So, what did Francis have to say about prayer and action? The following key principles, amongst others, informed his daily walk: a deliberate and constant practising of the Presence of God and the conviction that the love of God must be the motivator of all prayer and all action. Prayer, to Francis, clearly was more than trying to get God to do things; it was, first and foremost, about relationship, friendship with God, communion with his Maker and Friend. There are many memorable passages of writing in his corpus of work: on intimacy with God, for example, he poetically compares the union of the heart with God to “the way ivy clings to trees with roots that actually penetrate into the bark.”² Prayer and action both had to be motivated by love. And Jesus was his primary model and inspiration. On love he writes “The fire of [our Saviour’s] love consumed his life. He was the sacrificer and the sacrifice. He died in love, to love, by love, for love, and of love.”³ On the link between prayer and action he urged believers to: “accustom yourself to pass from prayer to action: the merchant to business, the married woman to her household and family ... Prayer and action are both according to God’s will, and we must make passage from one to the other in humble devotion.”⁴ He saw how easy it is for believers to imagine doing great things for God without actually doing them: “God preserve us from imaginary fervour that breeds a vain and secret self-esteem deep within us.” And “It is not enough to embrace great crosses in some undefined future circumstance. It would be better to take up lesser crosses that are present right now. There is a great temptation to be valiant in the imagination.”⁵ Ouch!

1 J.B. Midgley, *Francis de Sales*, CTS Great Saints Series, Catholic Truth Society, 2008, p.38

2 Bernard Bangley (ed.), *Living Love, A Modern Edition of Treatise on the Love of God by Francis de Sales*, Paraclete Press, Massachusetts, 2003, p.74

3 Ibid, p.121

4 J.B. Midgley, op. cit., p.45

5 Bernard Bangley, op.cit., p.138

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His writings are infused with Scriptural references and reflect devoted Bible study on his part. And, yes, the Scriptures are clear regarding God's will on the relationship between prayer and action. The apostle James writes, "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much";⁶ but just as faith without works is dead, so prayer that is divorced from Christian character and conduct (i.e. prayer that is neither fervent nor coming out of a righteous life) will, in all likelihood, not get much beyond the ceiling. Furthermore, a prayer life that is never accompanied by obedient, godly action, is likely to remain barren and sterile. Jesus made this clear early on in His ministry: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."⁷

But why pray, especially if God knows what we need before we ask Him?⁸ Philip Yancey in his excellent book entitled "*Prayer – does it make a difference?*"⁹ quotes Tim Stafford on this: "We do not pray to tell God what He does not know, nor to remind Him of things He has forgotten. He already cares for the things we pray about ... He has simply been waiting for us to care about them with Him. When we pray we simply stand by God and look with Him toward those people and problems."¹⁰ The answer, it seems, is that God always intended that life be a relational partnership of trust, and yes, obedience, between God and man, where God 'does stuff' and we, his friends, get to join in with what He is doing. Jesus modelled how we should live. He freely admitted His loving dependence on His Father: "Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."¹¹ Where did Jesus see what the Father was up to, or about to do? I believe it was primarily in the place of prayer, though doubtless on the hoof as well. His life's motto, from the age of twelve, was clear: He wanted to be where His Father was, "be about My Father's business"; He wanted to be where Love was, and do what Love did. And if Jesus prioritised this kind of attitude to prayer and action¹², surely we need to, also; the more so!

Love, obedience and the resultant intimacy of relationship were inseparable in Jesus' view: "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and

6 James 5:16

7 Matthew 7:21

8 Matthew 6:8

9 Philip Yancey, *Prayer – does it make any difference?* Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2006, p.50-51

10 Tim Stafford, *Knowing the Face of God - Deepening Your Personal Relationship with God*, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005, p.134.

11 John 5:19

12 Luke 2:49

make our home with them.”¹³ So, it seems, if love for God is to motivate our walk with God, the love of God will also compel our doing: Paul writes: “For Christ’s love compels us...”¹⁴ And taking action, even so-called charitable action, if it is not done for the right motives is meaningless: “If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”¹⁵ Heidi Baker, the modern-day missionary to Mozambique, whose ministry amongst the orphans and destitute of that country sounds like something straight out of the Acts of the Apostles, puts it this way: “Love looks like something” – in other words, love always has a practical, visible, outworking.¹⁶

TRUST

Of course, there are times when the prayer of faith sometimes requires us to simply trust and not act. Here, I guess, the trust is the act. There were, it seems, prayers prayed in the Bible that required no, or little, further action to be taken, such as when King Jehoshaphat and his army were faced with annihilation by a much larger army. The word of the Lord was clear and comforting, though probably terrifying at the same time: “You will not have to fight this battle.” [2 Chronicles 20:17]. This probably ran against the grain of human self-reliance – we usually feel we have to do something to help ourselves. However, in this context, to have tried to fight the battle, once the word of the Lord had come through, would have been tantamount to disobedience on Jehoshaphat’s part. Yet, reading on, it becomes clear God did require the Israelites to do something: “Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give you, Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the Lord will be with you.” Trusting God for deliverance, healing, or a breakthrough of any kind, is action in itself, but we should listen out for the divine directive that will clarify what the Lord expects of us. When we pray, we must always be open to the possibility that God may ask us to follow up our prayer with action, if only to trust Him but standing firm. The context of our prayer is always critical and God is interested as much in our character, heart posture, mind-set and action as in the prayer itself. Prayer always leads somewhere!

Jesus’ best known sermon, the Sermon on the Mount kicks off not with precepts about prayer but a list of Beatitudes – which were

13 John 14:23

14 2 Corinthians 5:14

15 1 Corinthians 13:3

16 Heidi Baker, with Shara Pradhan, *Compelled by Love - How to Change the World through the Simple Power of Love in Action*, Charisma House, Lake Mary, Florida, 2008, p.141

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beautiful attitudes, the qualities of Christian character that should underpin our action, and the value of which will be determined by our action (or lack of action): meekness, mercy, and peace-making are only realised in the market place of life, not in the place of solitude.

The Beatitudes are then followed by teaching on us being salt and light, both powerful images for our calling to live lives of impact on the society and community about us. As E.M. Bounds puts it in his classic on prayer: “Christians everywhere should be charged to pray by their lives or not pray at all.”¹⁷ The Lord’s prayer in Matthew 6, Jesus’ best known prayer or utterance on prayer, is preceded (not followed) by a teaching on giving to the needy and the avoidance of hypocrisy. And the primary focus is God, His Kingdom and His will. As someone once put it: if we are struggling to get answers to our prayers, maybe we need to change the subject of our conversations with God! In John 15, that great chapter on abiding in Christ, Jesus’ promise of answered prayer places the promise *after* the fruitful activity, not before it: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – *and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.*” This change of focus off ourselves is accompanied by one of Jesus’ best-known promises: “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”¹⁸ By ‘these things’ Jesus was referring to the things we humans tend to preoccupy ourselves with a lot, such as what we will eat, drink, or wear. Christ promises to act on our behalf when we pray and act on His agenda.

LISTENING

True prayer also involves taking time to listen to God. Jesus said: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”¹⁹ Too often it seems, we don’t get to hear His voice, because we are too busy trying to make our own voice heard, too impatient to listen for His answer, or have our “radio” tuned to the wrong station! Prayer then must flow out of a relationship of love and this relationship leads to a mutual knowing, and then the action of following the Good Shepherd where He wants to lead us, not necessarily where we want Him to take us. The relationship was always meant to be also a partnership of mutual trust. The various parables on stewardship in Matthew 25 make this clear. Here the lord congratulates and rewards those faithful servants of his who had wisely put to work their delegated charge and made a profit:

17 Harold Chadwick (ed.), *E.M. Bounds on Prayer, the Classic Collection*, Bridge-Logos Publishers, Orlando Florida, 2001, p.54

18 Matthew 6:33

19 John 10:27

“His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.”²⁰ Our partnership with Christ is about ‘doing life’ together, and therefore inevitably will involve the imperative of action, but this is action which God always intended to be collaborative and with the predetermined intention of furthering and deepening relationship. So prayer leads to action, but not aimless action, but rather delegated, entrusted, collaborative action that is virtually guaranteed to bear fruit if done right.

Why? Because, it is first and foremost God who takes action when we pray; the effective prayer is one that “prays what is on God’s heart”, rather than a shopping list of selfish wants. Paul in his epistle to the Romans puts it like this: “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.”²¹ This speaks again of prayer as a co-labouring, even a co-birthing in prayer (see verse 22). The Spirit of God does not wish to work independently of us; He is clearly asking us to join in partnership with Him in the place and act of prayer – doing, like Jesus did, that which in the place of prayer we see the Father doing or wanting to do, and co-labouring with Him.

HOW DO WE GET TO THAT PLACE?

Well, Jesus made it clear that prayer involves intentional effort, indeed sacrifice on our part, as well as dedicated time. Jesus frequently got up before dawn to pray.²² Why? Probably, because He knew that the daylight hours would bring demands and pressures and distractions, and with so many people needing and demanding His attention, He knew He needed to be Father-led in what He chose to do and not do. If He needed to do this, how much more do we. Our prayer life will require effort and sacrifice on our part!

Most tomes on the prayer life make it clear that prayer isn’t always, or even usually, easy to initiate let alone sustain, whether on our own or with other believers. C S Lewis admitted that much of the time prayer was hard work, but argues that this did not mean it wasn’t needful: “The painful effort which prayer involves is no proof that we are doing something we were not created to do. If we were perfected, prayer would not be a duty, it would be a delight. Some day, please God, it will be.”²³ Perhaps this is why

20 Matthew 25:23

21 Romans 8:26-27

22 Mark 1:35

23 C S Lewis, *Prayer, Letters to Malcolm*, HarperCollins, Glasgow, 1964, p.115

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prayer meetings and services typically are the least well attended of all services in our churches! Richard Foster in his classic book on the disciplines of the Christian life: *Celebration of Discipline*, compares prayer to learning to play the piano: “we may not feel like practicing the piano, but once we play for a while we feel like doing it. In the same way, our prayer muscles need to be limbered up a bit and once the blood-flow of intercession begins, we will find that we feel like praying.”²⁴ It certainly helps to pray with others. But before we pray with others we must cultivate our own private prayer life. Otherwise the communal prayer will be superficial and its rewards second-hand. In Matthew 6:6 Jesus said: “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” And surely in our day He might have added “... and turn off the mobile phone, TV and laptop!” What a challenge and yet also a promise – our Heavenly Father notices our private sacrifices – and He rewards!

PERSONAL JOURNEY

As founding leader of the Ballymena House of Prayer, which has been going since 2010, you might think I always find prayer easy. My journey with prayer has been a little bit like C S Lewis’s – a painful effort much of the time. The struggles have tended to be the same all my life as a believer: wrestling with the lack of desire, with competing distractions, the pleasures of life, the pressing business of life and the to-do lists, the warm comfort of bed, or the uninviting cold of the prayer room at 6am in the morning! When I get myself into the place of prayer it is then about finding the right heart posture, the how and the what, not to mention the how long. The enemy of our prayer life has tried on me both the lash of legalism and the lure of license to drive or tempt me away from engaging with the Lord from the place of rest and intimacy that makes prayer a true pleasure.

Over the years I have come to find a balance of disciplined routines/rhythms mixed with creative variety really helps. Worship music at the start, whether I am on my own, or leading a prayer group always helps to get my/our eyes off self onto the Lord, and lift one’s spirit. This also ensures one is praying from and in His Presence – where His yoke is light and His burden is easy. Praying Scripture, under one’s breath, or if possible out loud, is also important every time one comes to pray. Always have a note book by one’s side. This can be useful for writing down inspired thoughts, people or things one is praying for, and indeed those

²⁴ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline, the Path to Spiritual Growth*, Hodder & Stoughton, Sevenoaks, Kent, 1980, p.39-40

things to do that one's mind throws up that might threaten to take us away from the place of prayer. There are some excellent resources on prayer such as the 24-7 Prayer webpage entitled "Help Me Pray" which includes guidance on such themes as "Praying on the Move", "Praying the Bible", "Praying the Lord's Prayer – daily", "Bible Studies on Prayer", "How to Pray Using a Journal", and "Learn to Listen".²⁵

What has been my journey of moving from prayer to action? The biggest step, and source of encouragement, involved beginning to pray with other people, and not just for individual needs, but for the extension of God's Kingdom in my community, street, workplace, town and nation. Understanding what Jesus meant when He said "Seek first the Kingdom of God..." For me, I can truly say that this has been where my spiritual walk has been a story of an increasingly exciting and enriching adventure of discovery, personal growth, and realisation of how the Lord meets us more than half way as we obey His promptings. It has also been wonderful to discover the friendship and the joy of fellowship with believers from across the Body of Christ. Getting to know the universe's great Creative Genius, the Holy Spirit, in the context of discovering the richness and diversity in the Body of Christ has been the most awe-inspiring journey of my life.

When, with a few friends from a number of different churches in Ballymena, I launched the Ballymena House of Prayer, our point of departure and guiding vision was a strong sense that "God does nothing except in response to believing prayer."²⁶ We were also aware that one of the few unanswered prayers that Jesus prayed while He was on the earth was His prayer, in John 17, that His Bride/Church may be one as He and the Father were one.²⁷ We also had a deep conviction that prayer ought to be fulfilling and creative, accessible to all, not the preserve of a spiritual elite. We knew it would also take discipline and that a regular rhythm of prayer was vital. So, from virtually the outset we established a weekly two hour routine of corporate prayer between 6am and 8am on a weekday morning. We also were inspired to focus our prayers on what some have called the Seven Mountains of Culture, which would ensure our focus didn't become too narrow or focused only on the church(es).²⁸ Over the last eight years this small gathering has proven to be a catalyst for wider action and the incubator for a number of collaborative, cross-denominational initiatives in our town that have fostered greater unity in the Body of Christ in the town of Ballymena. The list that follows is a list of some of the

25 <https://www.24-7prayer.com/helpmepray>

26 John Wesley

27 John 17:20-23

28 <http://www.7culturalmountains.org/>

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initiatives that have come directly or indirectly from the House of Prayer:

- prayer for education (held on various occasions and in various schools in the town);
- prayer for the family (co-led by a Christian social worker and Care for the Family rep);
- prayer for local and national elections (the week before they took place);
- prayer for the police (held in the local police station!);
- prayer for the retail sector – held in an empty shopping unit in the town centre, and followed by the prayer team fanning out in pairs to offer a prayer for local businesses;
- Redeeming Our Communities (Ballymena) – this was the first branch of ROC UK²⁹ in Northern Ireland, and led to its province-wide launch in 2015. Particular activities coming out of ROC Ballymena was the ROC Café, a Youth Club in one of the estates in the town; a one-off POP-UP shop to encourage local artisans; and a website holding a services directory for local churches (translated into 6 ethnic minority languages); this has evolved directly into:
- The Church Page,³⁰ a web portal highlighting stories of what Christian churches and groups are doing across the town and region;
- The monthly Prayer of Blessing for Ballymena service - a semi-liturgical prayer service held each time in a different venue, launched in 2013 and which has been held in 19 different churches across Ballymena and Broughshane. This was inspired by the prayer rhythm and testimony of Ffald-y-Brenin, the Pembrokeshire community and retreat centre in South Wales, where remarkable community transformation has taken place since the launch of their regular rhythm of prayer for the community.³¹
- Without Walls (Ballymena)³² – launched in 2014: this is a collaborative movement of Christians from churches across the town, inspired by Jesus' yet-to-be-fully-answered prayer that He prayed shortly before His crucifixion, "that they may be one even as we are one". Without Walls encourages relationship-building across the churches in our town and beyond, the fellowship of believers from different churches, joint prayer and worship, and collaborative endeavour. To these ends Without Walls has organised an annual breakfast for church leaders from

29 <https://roc.uk.com/>

30 <http://www.thechurchpage.com/>

31 <http://www.ffald-y-brenin.org/>

32 <http://www.withoutwalls.org.uk/>

across the town and area, to encourage relationship building and partnership. It has also launched a healing ministry in the town called Healing on the Streets (Ballymena), which involves scores of trained individuals from 18 (at last count) different churches taking part, each with their church leader's knowledge and support. The latest WW project has been The Gathering, a networking of the leaders and members of some of the various and diverse outreach groups in the Ballymena area. At the first event, held in February 2018, representatives from 22 different locally-based/represented outreach organisations were present, including Foodbank, Christians Against Poverty, No More Traffic, Clubreach, Godmodex Bus Ministry, the Big House, St Vincent de Paul, Spark, SMMR FEST, and Healing on the Streets, to name just some of those present.

ONGOING JOURNEY

All of the above are the direct or indirect fruit of small mustard seeds of individual and corporate prayer that has borne fruit, and is still bearing fruit in different ways. The above activity needs to be sustained by prayer, and we are learning the importance of organising sustained and intentional "prayer canopies" to cover the workers and the work. In recent years Without Walls has launched its own Prayer Team to cover in protective prayer the individuals and activity connected with that ministry; also, in 2017 the Ballymena Prayer Canopy was launched to pray for the activity of the outreach groups while they were operating out on the streets. This is now being extended to covering the whole week. St Paul wrote towards the end of his life: "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people."³³

The journey continues. Not every prayer we pray bears fruit, or bears fruit immediately, or is answered in the way we visualised when we prayed it. Francis de Sales writes eloquently on this: "We want our projects to succeed. It is not reasonable to expect God to act exactly as we wish... We are to do everything possible to finish the work God has assigned us. My point is that we should be ready to calmly accept it if things do not work out the way we intend."³⁴ And later on he adds, "It is our part to plant and water carefully, but the harvest is in God's hands."³⁵ How do we plant and water? Firstly, we can, and must, plant and water the work of God in our lives with prayer. But then we must be ready, at His bidding, to plant and water with action.

33 Ephesians 6:18

34 Bernard Bangley, *op.cit.*, p.105

35 Bernard Bangley, *op.cit.*, p.106, and 1 Corinthians 3:6f.