

**CAHIER 3**

**THE UNIVERSE OF PRAYER**

## 1

**BASILIO: A MAN OF PRAYER**

Basilio was a man of God above all because prayer held a privileged place in his life and in his apostolate. The richness of his prayer life sheds light on the spiritual dimension of the man.

Our search for the sources of his prayer may begin with what we were able to see externally. This will reveal the efforts he made to help our Congregation to commit itself towards a deeper, more sincere, and more creative prayer, in communion with the Church and the world – a prayer in Spirit and in Truth. We will have the good fortune to find ourselves with a man of prayer and hopefully, to follow in his steps.

**1.1 The manifestations**

What we record of our observations of Basilio's prayer life is not only the result of a study by the people he lived with, by his confidants, his collaborators or simply by his Brothers and friends. Much is revealed in his writings: his circulars, his conferences and his whole approach to the animation of the Congregation. We will keep using this direct witness.

We first of all quote Father Francisco Migoya. This Mexican Jesuit priest was Basilio's spiritual guide during the thirty-day Exercises of St Ignatius that he undertook in Mexico in 1986, during his sabbatical year. It is the testimony of one with whom Basilio shared his spiritual confidences every day for a whole month. He said, "I had never met any man who could pray so spontaneously, so intensively, as if prayer had been his natural milieu."<sup>1</sup>

At this time Basilio had acquired a full measure of maturity. He had just completed eighteen years as superior general in a

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Basilio, Un Autre Champagnat*, pp. 86, 88.

particularly difficult period. The Church in the immediate aftermath of the Second Vatican Council was still in birth pangs. Her old traditions had almost gone but the new dawn was slow in coming. The young had begun to challenge everything, the universities were under assault and the values of society were shaken; in addition, progress in science and technology was bringing about rapid change in every area. It was a time calling for personal refreshment and for a spirit open to the constant assimilation of new things. In 1986, having completed eighteen years in office during this difficult period of eighteen years Basilio was able to take a sabbatical year. He set aside a good length of time for his own spiritual health. He spent a month immersed in Carmelite spirituality, another following the Great Exercises of St Ignatius, and a further month of study and prayer based on *Lectio Divina*. To crown it all, he made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Now, let us enter into the mystery of this man of God.

Brother Gabriel Michel, who was Brother Basilio's secretary for nine years, recalled that Father Barboux had spoken of the intense mystical life of Basilio. This Jesuit priest had been the one who had helped Basilio when he was giving retreats in the French-speaking world, as in Canada in 1970. He is a first hand witness.<sup>2</sup> During the retreats, Brother Basilio left long periods for personal prayer which was an example for all."

He advised the capitulants at the 1985 general chapter during the preparatory retreat: "Do not be afraid to consecrate many hours to meditation." (He actually recommended seven to eight hours to the major superiors in his conference: *Contemplation as the starting point of action*.)<sup>3</sup> Brother Louis Comte, a Swiss Brother, remembers Brother Basilio challenging the Brothers in this way, "To Brothers who wish to consecrate more time to meditation, I give every encouragement to them to do so. Those who have the courage to consecrate two hours to meditation may very well get up two hours before the others and do their extended contemplation."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Basilio: je veux éveiller l'aurore*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Actes du XVIII<sup>me</sup>*, p.67.

<sup>4</sup> *El Estilo de Una Vida*, p. 44.

Father Amador Menudo was Basilio's companion during the Holy Land pilgrimage in 1986. He said, "Every day, at five in the morning or during the night, Basilio would walk to Mount Calvary. Once there, he would take off his shoes and kneeling, would spend long hours absorbed in deep contemplation."<sup>5</sup> This same priest was his collaborator on numerous retreats in the Spanish-speaking countries. One of his memories is as follows: "The last part of his generalate, at least when I was with him, was dedicated to renewing the spiritual lives of the Brothers in every continent. During every retreat he would plan four or five talks that aimed at reviving a love of meditation. He exacted long days of work from us who were following him and gave us short nights! We would start our interviews at 5 A.M. and would carry on until 2 A.M. the next day... During the remainder of the night the Blessed Sacrament was exposed, and we would remain there for adoration. That was his rhythm!"<sup>6</sup> Once both of them went to the Russicum for a Byzantine liturgy. The priest remarked how Basilio had remained deeply recollected during this hour and a half ceremony of praise and adoration and he concluded by saying, "He was truly a contemplative soul."<sup>7</sup>

Brother Claudio Girardi wrote<sup>8</sup>: "He could not always be present at the community prayers. But he said, and nobody doubted his word, that he meditated for long hours every day. And when he meditated, we could see that he was really praying. The retreats he gave on prayer were very impressive. I helped him in many of those retreats in Argentina and in Brazil. I learned a lot from him. Yet, his prayer was not complicated, always very biblical and connected with current events."<sup>9</sup>

For Father Manuel Portillo, his special collaborator in most of the retreats he gave to the Spanish world, Basilio was a man of prayer,

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<sup>5</sup> Op. Cit., pp. 44-45.

<sup>6</sup> Testimony of 15 January 2003, p.2. (Written in Rome during his visit of 10 August to 16 January.)

<sup>7</sup> Idem.

<sup>8</sup> Brother Claudio Girardi, a Brazilian, had been Provincial and then Director of the International College in Rome at the time of Basilio, and finally a Councillor General.

<sup>9</sup> Testimony of 18 December 2002.

who methodically prepared a meditation the day before<sup>10</sup>. His prayer revealed great freedom, especially when he recited the rosary. The *Hail Marys* were filled with the joys, the problems and the hopes of his confreres. They were *Hail Marys* with flexible formulae, extended, personalised, overflowing with life, confidence, love, praise and supplication. Father Portillo recalled that the rosary recited in this way could last for a good hour. The same priest reported that when Basilio concluded his circulars he always spent a time in prayer somewhere around Rome. This is confirmed by the advice he gave to the provincials when he sent out his circular on prayer: “Let me ask you to read this letter in a spirit of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament or in some other place where you can experience the greatest possible union with God.”<sup>11</sup> This circular was the climax of a long period of effort on the part of the General Council, from 1976 to 1982, aimed at giving the Brothers a taste for prayer and meditation.

Brother Hector Julián of the province of Córdoba, reports: “Very early one morning when entering the chapel, I found Brother Basilio with arms held high in front of the Blessed Sacrament.” He was struck with such joy and was moved with such admiration that he tiptoed out of the chapel greatly edified by our superior general.

A Brother, astounded by the amount of work Basilio did, asked him, “But when do you go to bed?” Basilio answered simply, “Well, if it is 4 A.M. I consider it is not worthwhile going to bed for an hour. I go to the chapel for a time of adoration till the community arrives for the morning prayer.”

One of his novices, Arturo Franco, said something similar: “I discovered that Basilio had a deep love of Christ. He insisted on our search for an intimate relationship with the Lord, in order that in any activity the Father would be present. His courses were complete theological treatises. He spent the class time to explain in

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Basilio, Un Autre Champagnat*, p. 54.

<sup>11</sup> *Circ.: L'Oraison*, p. 326.

details the attitudes of the model religious, or rather those of Christ.”<sup>12</sup>

*We have, too, the episode narrated in Basilio: Un Autre Champagnat<sup>13</sup>, under the heading “The Gold Museum or the Mass”. It happened that Basilio, arriving by a flight that happened to be delayed, wanted to visit the Brothers.*

While taking him back to the hotel where he was to stay the Brothers happened to drive past the Gold Museum, the most famous museum in Bogata, and they suggested that he might stop and visit it. But Basilio, who had not been to Mass, asked them to drive him to a church instead. At the first church the daily Masses were finished and the Brothers at last found a church quite some distance away in a poor suburb where Mass was about to be celebrated. At the end of the Mass, he expressed his joy at having the opportunity to pray with the poor.

He did everything he could to make sure that he did not miss his daily Mass; the Eucharist was the central point of his day and of his life. Regarding this, he wrote: “Christ, who is the mediator of our prayer, addresses the Father in a special way at the heart of a community of believers. The Church is born, grows and moves in this action through which Christ lives as the Son before the Father, surrenders himself to his Father and in this offering, leads all his Brothers in meditation in praying to the Father and adoring him. In this action we believers allow ourselves be assimilated to the Son, we allow him to make an offering of us, we become present before the Father. This is the action where we offer ourselves as Church, as Brothers: we call this action, the great prayer of the Church, the Eucharist.”<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere, he is even more explicit: “The Eucharist as sacrifice and sacrament is the climax of our communion. All the other communions, those within the community, from the simple time spent together in recreation to our apostolic action that brings us together as a

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<sup>12</sup> *El Estilo de Una Vida*, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> P. 8.

<sup>14</sup> Circ. 2 January 1968: *Les Appels de l’Eglise...*, p. 625.

witnessing community have their origin and orientation from their starting point: the Eucharistic banquet.”

Brother Alfonso Wimer, a Mexican Brother who was a good friend of Basilio and a member of his general council from 1967 to 1976 said: “Very few people knew his great devotion to the Most Holy Eucharist. Brother Basilio dedicated an hour to adoration every day in spite of his numerous occupations and journeys, his correspondence and the writing of his circulars. He never missed ‘his hour with the Lord’”<sup>15</sup>.

Brother Sebastião Ferrarini, who worked closely with Basilio, testifies: “He had a deep spirituality and a great sensibility regarding prayer and meditation. He lived these realities with such intensity that he would forget what was going on around him.”<sup>16</sup>

Basilio completed his second mandate in September 1985. For this occasion, the province of Madrid published a special issue of its magazine, *Madrid-Marista*. It was a portrait of the soul of Basilio. The page on prayer reads: “Basilio’s life is a continual song of praise to the Lord, a hymn in his own style. Do not look for a structured formula, a programmed prayer; Basilio’s spirit of prayer breaks all the moulds; his prayer has grown universal, at the service of all the children of God. When a person consecrates his life, and burns out his life for the good of his Brothers and gives them all his time, he finds himself in continual praise of God. That does not mean that he has no time for a direct presence before the Lord, his moments of community prayer, but he was always with the ones that God put in his path. That is how I see Basilio’s prayer.”<sup>17</sup>

Since we are recalling the persons who witnessed Basilio’s prayer life, we could add the great number of Brothers who because of his example and his writings started to live a more intense and integrated spiritual life. These Brothers spoke of this in the letters

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<sup>15</sup> *El Estilo de Una Vida*, p. 45.

<sup>16</sup> *El Estilo de Una Vida*, p. 41.

<sup>17</sup> *Madrid-Marista*, Special Number, December 1985, p. 8.

they wrote to Basilio or in their testimonies. We find many echoes of this kind in the circular on Fidelity. Brother Basilio himself tells us this: “Many Brothers who had spent long years diminishing themselves by activism and leaving too little to prayer, have suddenly entered into the Lord’s friendship.”<sup>18</sup>

Basilio disclosed why he admired one of his university teachers, Oswaldo Robles: this scientist was also a man of prayer, who attended mass daily and began his days with an hour of meditation. Basilio called himself the spiritual son of this professor.<sup>19</sup>

Let us allow Brother Basilio’s successor, Brother Charles Howard, to conclude those few testimonies. He wrote: “He stimulated a deep renewal of our spiritual life. His competence in this field was based on his personal union with God in prayer.”<sup>20</sup>

Numerous writings - circulars, conferences, articles, and retreats - reveal the importance Basilio gave to prayer, especially personal prayer and the Eucharist. During the first years of his generalate his retreats were centred on the theme of renewal. Subsequently, there was a change of emphasis: his stress was on prayer as one of the great means to improve the Brothers’ spiritual life, to help them to persevere and to strengthen their apostolic life. However it can be seen from the publications in Canada, Norte, Castille and Bética that he also spoke a great deal about prayer even in his first years. But when it became his central theme, prayer occupied the whole time of the retreats.

Among his writings we have: *Vocal Meditation of a Superior General* (1971), *A Talk on Prayer, Creativity in Community Prayer* (1975) and *Meditation* (1982). At the same time all of his other circulars have a chapter or numerous pages on prayer. In his Circular of 2 January 1968, for example, *The Appeals of the Church and the Founder*, there is a reflection on prayer (pages 591 to 618). What he has to say will

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<sup>18</sup> Circ.: *L’Oraison*, p. 360

<sup>19</sup> Op. cit., p. 41-42.

<sup>20</sup> *Je veux éveiller l’aurore*, p. 86.

be treated here, and some of it will be found in the texts quoted later. His Circular on *Obedience*, one of his most outstanding works, introduces us to his spiritual world and reveals the very core of his holiness, his love and his thirst for the will of God. In this circular we see his profound and transparent sanctity, his openness to the will of God and his efforts to attune the Brothers to this will.

How could he write the circular, *The Project of Community Life*, and another one on *Community Life*<sup>21</sup>, without speaking about prayer? Similarly, he could not write, *Mary in Our Life* without entering the spiritual domain. As for his circular on *Fidelity* it may be styled the sanctuary of Marist prayer, not only Basilio's, but also one for all Marist Brothers. During the general conference of the Provincials from 6 to 21 May 1974, which already had the next general Chapter in view, Basilio told the Brothers: "The next general chapter will spend most of its time centred on prayer and spiritual activities. All its undertakings will have to be saturated with deep spirituality."<sup>22</sup> The last two lectures he gave as superior General at the 1985 chapter dealt with Christian Spirituality and Marist Apostolic Spirituality.

Many Brothers remember the high quality of his retreats on prayer. These were real schools of prayer, times of grace where they learned how to pray better, and to pray, too, for the desire to be with the Father, in the Son and to be animated by the same Spirit that caused the Son to cry out with ineffable joy, "Abba, Father!" The Brothers were all deeply moved as they were convinced that they were in the presence of a man of deep conviction, a man with an authentic experiencing God, a mystic, yet one who was their Brother, close to them, extremely human and simple in the sharing of his life.

Brother Enrique Hurtado, who worked closely with him, said: "We admired his tireless dedication to work; he did not count the number of hours he laboured for us: the elaborate preparation of his circulars, of his retreats and assemblies and the time spent on

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<sup>21</sup> Circ.: *Projet Communautaire*, 1978, and Circ.: *Project de Vie Communautaire*, 1980.

<sup>22</sup> *Madrid-Marista*, No, 12, August 1974, p. 9.

interviews or on correspondence. We knew he slept little. His devotedness was extraordinary. During the retreat he introduced the vigil of prayer. I found myself with him on several occasions. I discovered alongside me a man of prayer. Kneeling motionless, with his eyes fixed on the tabernacle, his whole countenance said everything. There was no need for many words to convince us.”<sup>23</sup>

Because of his rich prayer life and his deep conviction of the importance of prayer, Basilio could offer sound advice to his Brothers and friends:

- Your care for your neighbour cannot justify neglecting prayer because time spent in prayer is not lost for our Brothers. It is a better use of time since it makes our action more effective and draws our neighbour into the heart of God’s action.<sup>24</sup>
- Without a proper level of prayer, a community will break up.<sup>25</sup>
- Prayer is a great help in maintaining charity and unity.<sup>26</sup>
- Without a prayer that keeps nourishing us, our whole religious life degenerates.<sup>27</sup>
- Every man, by the very fact that he is a man, is called to dialogue with God.<sup>28</sup>

Because of his conviction of the importance of prayer as a means of purifying the spiritual life, Basilio was keen to send Brothers to prayer sessions at Troussures, under the direction of Father Caffarel, at Spello with Father Carlo Caretto (a truly holy man who spent six hours each day in adoration) and at Loppiano among the Focolarini where there was a deep atmosphere of prayer.

Basilio, who as superior general had insisted that formators offer real experiences of prayer to the young, was later, appointed master of novices back in Mexico. The part of the house that drew most of his attention was the chapel, which became a true place

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<sup>23</sup> *El Estila de Una Vida*, p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> *Circ.: Les Appels de l’Eglise...*, p. 600.

<sup>25</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 601.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

for recollection<sup>29</sup>. One of his novices said” “What I admired in Brother Basilio was his great love for Jesus and Mary, and his respect for everything sacred. The way he made his daily meditation was a superb example for us who could not help observing him. He explained meditation to me and lent me books that helped me to deepen my faith. But above all it was his example that keeps helping me to grow in my spiritual life. Everything he said, and everything that I read in those books, was part of him. At shared prayer he spoke to Jesus with great love.<sup>30</sup>”

Basilio was a man of prayer, convinced of the importance of prayer, transparently so: it was reflected in all his activity, his writing, the advice he gave to the Brothers, and the choices that he made. What then were the sources of his prayer?

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Basilio: un Autre Champagnat*, p. 52.

<sup>30</sup> *El Estilo de Una Vida*, p. 44.

## 2

**THE SOURCES OF BASILIO'S PRAYER**

It was often through a turn of phrase in one of his written reflections, or letters or conferences that Basilio allowed a glimpse of the depth of his prayer. He was not one tied to formulas, but rather, a man who entertained a deep, intimate and humble relationship with God. He knew how to listen to the Word, and how to leave some moments of silence to allow God to speak to him. He stood before God just as he was, as he always lived, and spoke to him, as a son to his father, as a faithful disciple to his master, as a child to his mother. Let us therefore enter into the personal depths of this man with great respect.

**2.1 A grace**

Above all, Basilio was singled out by a grace and a call as a result of which he surrendered himself completely to God. Freely and out of love, God chose him and set him aside, as he always does when he sees that his people need men of light to show the way when the going becomes difficult. This call always respects the freedom of the individual and enhances it. Basilio wrote texts of mystical beauty that described what grace does in a heart when it takes hold of a man. He spoke in a similar way to describe his spiritual journey.<sup>31</sup>

“There is no doubt that I must give God all the credit. There was a complete change in my life. My main interest became my prayer life and it was not difficult for me to consecrate complete hours to personal prayer. Daily Eucharist became a real need.”<sup>32</sup> We know that Basilio was one of the main writers of the new Constitutions. Article 11 echoes his own experience: “God chooses individual men and women and calls each of them by name. He leads them

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<sup>31</sup> The quotations referred to here may be found in Booklet 1, pp. 3-15.

<sup>32</sup> Extracts from the book, *Religiosos de hoy: experiencia y testimonio*, Madrid, 1980: Testimony of Brother Basilio.

into the desert and there speaks to their hearts. Those who heed him, he sets apart. By his Spirit he transforms them constantly, leading them more deeply into his love in order to send them out on mission. Thus, is born a covenant of love, in which God gives himself to the person, and the person to God - a covenant which the Scriptures speak of as a betrothal. From the heart of covenant flows the whole dynamic of conversion.”

What he says about the prophet, Basilio does not extract from books, he needs only report on his own experience. “Prophecy originates in God. Thus, it is bestowed on someone who lives in relationship with God. This relationship, created above all by prayer; also awakens a passion for the Kingdom...

“The prophet feels blazing in his heart a passion for God’s glory and, once he has welcomed God’s word, he proclaims it by his words, by his actions, by his thoughts and in his contacts with others...

Once a person has committed his life on the field of God’s love, there is no retreating. The candle burns at both ends...

Whoever has known the fascination of God’s love knows he no longer belongs to himself. The soul, in fact, does not ask for anything, it simply gives itself. The Lord’s will is placed well above the love of self and one’s desire becomes an absolute availability. When God’s love breaks into someone’s life, it triggers a type of love that cannot be measured on the scales of reason.”<sup>33</sup>

It is in this climate that Basilio chooses as his motto: **to burn out my life for Christ**. “I understand that fidelity essentially consists in staying in the Father’s house and in the place where the Church has placed me in spite of my sins, in spite of everything. Fidelity is also to try to respond to fraternal solidarity and the heritage that the past has bequeathed me with all the love possible and with the keenest enthusiasm. I feel this fidelity within me as a heartfelt duty that rewards me with great joy and interior happiness. This is why I feel that it is so beautiful, so magnificent, to persevere in this fidelity in spite of crosses, sufferings and falls. Fidelity is not a

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<sup>33</sup> *Quemar la Vida*, p. 305.

thing, it is a life, a journey that runs from birth to death.”<sup>34</sup> These lines are taken from his last testimony. His whole busy life was wrapped up in prayer, and in his loving relationship with God.

At prayer, Basilio was first of all one who listened. How many times he repeated to the Brothers: “We talk too much to God, we don’t listen to him enough.” When Basilio wrote to the Brothers, he kept his ears alert to God’s voice while his eyes observed the world. This gave him the kind of confidence that we see in the words he wrote in his first circular of 2 January 1968: he was wondering how he would present the Council’s documents to the Brothers, what approach he would use. After he had made his choice, he admitted: “I do not pretend to be right. I simply allowed the Lord to be active in my soul; I waited calmly until all the truths that he brought me to see took on their proper dimensions. I merely tried to listen to the Lord.”<sup>35</sup>

Basilio always wrote to the Brothers in the context of prayer: “Love is more than a dedicated and silent life; love looks for dialogue, it needs relationship. Love and communication are vital requisites. There are different degrees of dialogue. First of all, it is an indispensable means of making moral life possible but then it eventually becomes a need to express and communicate a reality that the heart cannot contain any longer.”<sup>36</sup>

Like Jeremiah, Basilio can peacefully say, “You seduced me Lord, and I let myself be seduced.”<sup>37</sup> In this seduction-prayer there is a constant revelation of God the Father, the Son and the Spirit; the heart is evangelised. God is a father whose kindness and fidelity are absolute.

The circular on *Obedience*, Basilio’s masterpiece, is in fact, a long reflection on God’s will, seen as the greatest and the surest opportunity for spiritual success for man, the royal way of God’s love and of man’s love. In this circular Basilio tells us of the

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<sup>34</sup> Message written by Basilio a month before his death, in *Quemar la Vida*, pp. 306-307.

<sup>35</sup> Circ.: *Les Appels de l’Eglise...*, pp. 364, 367.

<sup>36</sup> Circ.: *Les Appels de l’Eglise...*, p. 594.

<sup>37</sup> Jeremiah 20:7.

mystery that lives in us, that “Christ is me and I am Christ.” This statement was formulated in different words in the circular of 2 January 1968: “Jesus of Nazareth is the fullest accomplishment of what God can become for men and of what men can become for God.”<sup>38</sup> These affirmations are daring, even staggering, but nevertheless true either because through his Incarnation, “Jesus finally becomes each one of us”, or because it is the Spirit of the Son that comes upon us and prays in us.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, we can say that the source of Basilio’s prayer is his interior world: a God who gives to anyone who surrenders himself to him, passionately echoing the cry of St Paul: “Who can separate us from the love of Christ?”<sup>40</sup> Basilio’s source is to be found in his interior world where God finds a generous availability, room for freedom of action and a love that responds to his will.

## 2.2 Another set of sources

Basilio’s prayer has other sources that we may say enter from the outside: the Scriptures, the Eucharist, the liturgy, the Church, the world and the totality of Marist spiritual wealth. These lend the words, the feelings, the gestures, the light and the content of his prayer. We discover them every time Basilio invites the Brothers to pray according to the Spirit and in communion with the Church and the world. We discover them again whenever Basilio indicates the difference between the former method of prayer consisting of set exercises, and the prayer encouraged by Vatican II in which rigid forms should disappear to give way to the freedom of the Spirit which offers so much more.

As for the sources related to the Church, the world and the Marist spiritual heritage, we may look again at the fourth and fifth parts of the circular of 2 January 1968, *The Appeals of the Church and the Founder*. In these four hundred pages one can see Basilio’s passion

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<sup>38</sup> Circ.: *Les Appels de l’Eglise...* p. 611.

<sup>39</sup> Op. cit., pp. 613-615.

<sup>40</sup> Romans 8:35.

for the Church and for all that is Marist, as well as his admiration and amazing knowledge of our Founder. We can see, too, Basilio's passion for the salvation of the world, which kept his heart open to the joys, the exploits, and the dramas of our humanity; these always had a place in his prayer.

What Basilio says of Mary in prayer reveals the importance he gave to the Scriptures, to the Psalms; he wanted us to assimilate them so that they could become part of our spontaneous prayer. Here we see how Mary became the window through which Basilio contemplated the whole panorama of prayer.<sup>41</sup>

The third series of prayer sources are the virtues that enrich prayer: love, obedience that is a passion for the will of God and an immense respect for the human person. Love ennobles the person in whatever he does, prayer, work or relating to God or man. Obedience ennobles the relationship with God and proclaims his grandeur. The third ennobles the other because it is a recognition of the person's grandeur. The conjunction of love and obedience leads to the prayer of adoration; besides, both love and respect are necessary for prayer of intercession to have its real value.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Circ.: *Les Appels de l'Eglise...*, p. 375.

<sup>42</sup> See the texts at the end of Ch. 7.

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**THE CONDITIONS NECESSARY FOR PRAYER**

When Basilio wrote on the theme of prayer, he had as his starting point his knowledge of the Brothers' prayer life and of their concrete life situation. He often pointed out the conditions necessary for intimacy with God. Here we will indicate only a few.

**1. Personal asceticism** leads to prayer. This asceticism consists in trying to acquire habits of attentiveness, recollection, and silence. Note that these habits hold true either in relationship with God or with persons: "The inability of many men of our generation to remain absorbed in deep thought alone, in order to enter into contact with others in a deep human relationship, and their escape from reality by seeking trivial and frivolous relations with persons and things, through superficial forms of enjoyment, amusement and use of time 'to kill time', stifles relationship with God and renders prayer more or less deficient and even impossible.."43

He told our Canadian confreres, in 1970, "It is only by dint of repeating actions that are contrary to his desires and whims that a man can begin to do God's will. He then starts to die to self. For to be able to adhere to God's will, he must first clean and purify his own will."44

Already, at the beginning of his first circular of 2 January 1968 he wrote: "One would be naive to believe that without the love of the cross, without the gradual, adequate and serious practice of Christian asceticism, we could witness the moral miracles of the witness, devotion and total self-giving that are the fruits of the Church and of Christ"45

Probably the most beautiful evidence of this in Basilio is found in what he wrote about the Founder, something that was his own

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43 Circ.: *Les Appels de l'Eglise...*, p. 610.

44 *Revue de la Province d'Iberville*, p. 3, notes taken by Br Arthur Dugay.

45 Circ.: *Les Appels de l'Eglise...*, p. 610.

ideal and experience: “There is a book written by Bonhoffer entitled, ‘The Cost of Discipleship,’ a remarkable book which brings out just how much it costs to be a real disciple of the Lord, to commit oneself to follow his path for the rest of one’s life, to remain faithful ‘even unto death’. For Father Champagnat and for all the saints recognised by the Church there was a long process of study of the man, the interior aspect dealing with his virtues, the exterior aspect dealing with his miracles. This process finally led to the firm affirmation that these men were really disciples of Christ, that they had paid the price to an indisputably heroic degree. In the face of these men, all standardization, all petty calculations of how to share oneself between God and the world, vanish away. Their whole existence has been absorbed, unified and transformed for the sake of God alone.”<sup>46</sup>

Father Migoya reported that Basilio easily prolonged the time of his meditations to as much as two hours. But Basilio insists that one comes to pray in that way by degrees only, “Many forget that prayer is indispensable to the Christian and the religious, and that no one learns to pray without hard work and constant practice... In the beginning prayer seems alien to us, sometimes becomes painful, and, alternating between periods of consolation and aridity, it can easily end in discouragement. We are faced here with a problem that all have to face, and that each one must resolve for himself, counting on the guidance and support of the ‘Holy Spirit who dwells in us’ (1 Cor 6:18).’...No one can resolve this problem, nor can anyone even learn to pray, by running away from prayer (Voillaume). And we will never help our Brothers to resolve this problem if we aim at shaping a style of religious life that skirts around the effort that prayer demands.”<sup>47</sup>

**2. An initiation** is needed if one wants to walk in the universe of prayer. Basilio judged it essential that candidates for the religious life should be initiated into prayer by men of prayer. Basilio considered it was only logical that candidates to religious life should be initiated by men of prayer and that they bring about a

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<sup>46</sup> Circ.: *Année Champagnat*, p. 172.

<sup>47</sup> Circ.: *Les Appels de l’Eglise...*, pp. 596-597.

real and deep experience of meeting God. He wrote: “What we need is Brothers filled with the Spirit of God, experts in the spiritual life, capable of creating in their charges a real need for God, the need to search for Him in the realm of faith... Yes, we must have Brothers capable of initiating our aspirants, even the youngest, in the art of conversing with God, Brothers who in the communities where our young Brothers first start their apostolate will help them to persevere and develop that familiarity with God which is only in a germinal stage in the houses of formation.”<sup>48</sup>

3. The initiation should lead to **spiritual direction**. Basilio reminds us that it is practically impossible to live a serious and coherent spiritual life without accompaniment. When for a time his spiritual director was living near Paris he looked for every possible opportunity to meet him, letting him know well ahead when he would be coming. If this was not possible he regretted the circumstance that prevented the possibility of meeting.

4. Basilio also reminded the Brothers of our need of a **religious culture** to nurture our spiritual life. He wrote precious pages on religious and spiritual studies since he was conscious that these two structures were more and more falling into disuse in our congregation. Yet these two exercises were and are still sure signs of a healthy spiritual life: “The fear of study, the avoidance of spiritual renewal, the incapacity to achieve a systematic and prolonged time of prayer - these are not healthy symptoms. How can a Brother be an effective apostle without a deep spiritual life?”

<sup>49</sup> He advised the Provincials to suggest good books, houses of prayer and movements aimed at renewal of prayer in the Church: the Focolarini, Troussures and Father Caffarel, Spello with Carlo Carretto, charismatic groups...

5. Drawing on his good sense and experience he gave this advice, “Plan a **regular and sufficient time** for prayer and try to obtain the Brothers’ generous fidelity to the agreed timetable.”<sup>50</sup> This

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<sup>48</sup> Circ.: *Les Appels de l’Eglise...*, pp. 597-598.

<sup>49</sup> Circ.: *L’Oraison*, p. 344.

<sup>50</sup> Op. cit., p. 347.

brings us back to the asceticism mentioned above: if we want to live spiritual lives, we must create regular habits and discipline our bodies, our attentiveness and our hearts.

6. Finally, we must remember that the Marist Brother is not an isolated individual: he lives in a community, in a province, in the great Marist family. Therefore, prayer demands that the community, the province and the congregation create **the support structures** that will develop prayer both for individuals and groups. “We will need a pedagogy that will include accompaniment, animation and mutual help.”<sup>51</sup> Basilio told the Provincials, “A superior should have a good enough friendship with his Brothers and enough pastoral initiative to know what their prayer situation is, to know the dynamism of their meditation, its style and regularity, their faithfulness to it and, more easily still, whether the community and provincial structures sustain their prayer lives or not.”<sup>52</sup> He tried to set the whole congregation in motion to create structures that would favour a vital approach to community and personal prayer: “What I have told you must help you to sensitise the members of your councils so that this subject (meditation) may have their attention in theory and practice before your meeting with the General Council and the other provincials planned for the near future.”<sup>53</sup>

So far, we have enumerated external factors that create favourable conditions for prayer. Prayer, however, is born inside the self and it is in our selves, deep within ourselves, that something must arise and become both the dynamism and the fruit of prayer: “Three things are needed to build a proper foundation for spiritual growth,

- a real experience of God, of the living God, of God the Lord of the history of salvation, who loves us to the point of folly.
- a passion for the Kingdom that can bear with long periods of effort, dryness, and crises of faith when we find ourselves facing the full force of the secularised world.

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<sup>51</sup> Op. cit., p. 357.

<sup>52</sup> Op. cit., p. 356.

<sup>53</sup> Circ.: L’Oraison, p. 363.

- A level of faith that goes from the conceptual to a lived reality, a rock that will support the building that will integrate contemplation and action.”<sup>54</sup>

We must honestly admit that Basilio gave us everything needed to open the way to prayer and make a joyful start on it.

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<sup>54</sup> Conference on Apostolic Spirituality, General Chapter 1985.

## 4

**THE FRUITS OF PRAYER**

There is a risk here of simply repeating what we have learned from classical descriptions of the fruit of prayer. To avoid this, we will stay as much as possible with Basilio's words and keep in contact with his life experience.

**4.1 Fruits in the heart**

It is clear from the writings and the life of Basilio that prayer produces fruits in the heart of the one who prays. Prayer gives an experiential knowledge of God; it is a time of revelation and evangelisation where God is known and loved as a Father. Speaking about the Founder, Basilio said, "He had a very keen sense of the fatherliness and kindness of God". Basilio observed that the French Church had not been free of certain jansenist ideas that emphasized fear, sin and hell.<sup>55</sup> Prayer that brings us into direct contact with God frees us from such oppressive theological burdens because this prayer reveals the Father, and brings to mind telling passages from the New Testament: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn. 3:16), or: "God is love!" (1 Jn. 4:7). It was in the light of prayer that Basilio discovered the great secret that is ours, "Christ is me and I am Christ," and that "Jesus is who we can succeed in being for God and God for us."<sup>56</sup> It is also through prayer that we come to know by experience that the one who prays in us is the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we acquire the habit of submitting our prayer to Him, of abandoning ourselves to Him that He may exclaim, "Abba, Father!"<sup>57</sup>

Basilio thinks of Marcellin as a person shaped by prayer. He writes: "His humanity always seems permeated by the light of God

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<sup>55</sup> Circ.: *Les Appels de l'Eglise...*, p. 592.

<sup>56</sup> Op. cit., p. 611.

<sup>57</sup> Op. cit., pp. 613-615.

whom he loved above all. At the bottom of his heart, we find not a man, but God. Champagnat is not a humanist or a social leader; he is a saint, behaving like a saint.”<sup>58</sup>

We know that we too can say of the Founder all that Basilio says of him, in the same way that so many testimonies have done. Another aspect that Basilio notes is found when he cites long quotations from a conference given by Father Olegario Gonzales, something he does with such spontaneity that we cannot be too sure at any moment just who is speaking, his thoughts and those of the speaker being so close as to be almost identical: their conviction is that the discovery of God and the capacity to hold a dialogue with him reveals the basic nature of human existence and allows it to realise itself. In regard to this, they recall Saint Augustine’s saying: “You have made us for yourself O Lord, and our hearts can find no rest until they rest in you.”<sup>59</sup>

One of the immediate fruits will be a certain ease and a sure joy in practising virtue. Basilio quotes a beautiful excerpt from the Founder, “How easy is virtue and how easy the sacrifices it requires when one loves Jesus! The love of Jesus does for religious who endeavour to walk virtue’s path, what sails do for a ship; this love spurs him onwards, without being aware of the fact, to the practice of the highest virtues.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, prayer acts firstly on the one who prays: it is light, it is love, it is strength.

## 4.2 The source: the apostolate

This intensity of interior life will tend to overflow into all types of apostolate. Prayer creates the need to surrender oneself. We have seen that Basilio spoke along these lines in the magnificent texts already quoted, but he did more; his life reveals how much he was devoted to the Brothers and how deeply he was committed to the apostolate for which “he burned his life at both ends”. That was

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<sup>58</sup> Op. cit., p.593.

<sup>59</sup> *Confessions I.1; C.1*, quoted in the Circ.: *Les Appels de l’Eglise...*, p. 609.

<sup>60</sup> Circ.: *Les Appels de l’Eglise...*, p. 592.

his joy and his ideal, “To burn my life for Christ!” He wrote, “As for the faithful man – especially the saint - he is the one who not only talks but acts. Love seeks dialogue, it needs communication; it is its vital necessity.”<sup>61</sup>

Automatically, he looked at the Marist model, Marcellin, our Founder, and he wrote: “Everybody knows how our Founder’s interior vitality manifested itself, in his intrepid zeal, in his ardent charity towards each and every one, towards all their needs, especially moral ones, in the work of his Institute which was a gift of the heart to a world in distress.”<sup>62</sup> At the foot of the same page, Basilio wrote an important note that was as true of himself as it was for the Founder: “Here is a characteristic trait of a saint. Whereas a man with a social conscience is deeply moved by every human misery such as hunger, poverty, disease and pain, the charity of the saint, while being very concerned by these difficulties, becomes more active when confronted by moral and religious sufferings. This is quite normal, because the hierarchy of Gospel values is engraved on his heart.”<sup>63</sup>

### 4.3 Prayer as source of communion

Prayer becomes a source of communion with those who live and work with us; it transforms community into communion. In the retreat he gave in 1970, Basilio told the Canadian Brothers: “There is a lot of dialogue these days. This is very good. But do not trust any dialogue which was not born in prayer and which is not preceded by prayer. It is by prayer that we succeed in entering into God’s view of things and speaking in conformity with the His will.”<sup>64</sup>

All of Basilio’s colleagues agree about how he sought collaboration, trusted others, created a family spirit and turned community into communion. He wrote: “Prayer is a powerful help

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<sup>61</sup> Op. cit., p. 594.

<sup>62</sup> Op. cit., p. 591.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> *Le Rev. Fr. Basilio parmi nous*, p. 67, Canada-Iberville.

in maintaining charity and unity when our neighbour gets on our nerves.” Quoting Vieujean he continued, “Love of our neighbour is like love of God; it is maintained, nurtured, and deepened only by recollection, meditation, dedication and penance. It is impossible to harm our neighbour when we act in a state of prayer,” and he continues his own thought, “Truly, prayer lightens and calms everything; through it everything takes on its proper perspective. We cannot approach God without sharing his spirit, his tolerance, his patience and his kindness. Whenever my neighbour crosses me, or irritates me, he becomes a ‘thing’; it is enough to remember that neighbour in my prayer for him to become a ‘person’ again.”<sup>65</sup>

#### 4.4 The man in action

We might be tempted to think, “We all know the theory”. But, remember the overflowing activity of Basilio, his listening skill, his capacity to be available to others for as long as they wanted, his patience, his availability, the long detours he made in his travels to go and comfort Brothers in difficulty, his attention to the poor, the extraordinary energy he drew on to orientate the Institute effectively towards the missions and the poor, to renew our Marist family as Vatican II had requested. We remember the lectures and retreats he gave to help us renew our prayer, to leave formalism behind and become more authentically ourselves before God. We recall his Circular on Community Life summoning us to live together in a more evangelical, fraternal and adult manner. We must not forget the numerous personal letters he wrote; the Brothers who received the largest number and the most affectionate of these letters were the Brothers working in Mozambique and in Angola. He knew they were constantly threatened by Marxism and lived in precarious conditions. He shared with them so much wisdom and love, and maintained such a fatherly presence because they had the greatest need for his attention. Basilio was not a man to be satisfied with theory; for

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<sup>65</sup> Circ.: *Les Appels de l'Eglise...*, p. 601.

him everything, like prayer for instance, was never just a theory, it was his life.

#### 4.5 Disasters brought by the absence of prayer

The benefits of prayer are revealed in the light of another fact, that is, what happens when prayer is absent. Setting aside the theories, actual experience has proved that a spiritual life without meditation is not a true spiritual life. A spiritual life that would wish to do without prayer is an utopia. Our Founder said it quite unambiguously: “A Brother who does not know how to pray does not know how to practise virtue nor how to educate children properly. A religious who is not pious will never esteem or love his vocation because he will not find any consolation in it.”<sup>66</sup> Basilio calls our attention of the following fact: “The more people speak of personality, the more they seek to exalt it while growing more progressively blind to its weakness and misery. To anyone with a little faith it is evident that a lack of prayer leads to lack of depth in the human person. In times where there is so much talk and debate about the Christian life or the consecrated religious life, paradoxically the Christian and religious life are lived superficially, and there is uncertainty about life’s basic values; instead of an urge to improve it, there is a break down in convictions.”<sup>67</sup>

In the retreat he directed in Canada, in 1970, Basilio described false prophets: “There are people who will accept only a renewal that means concessions: enjoying a good weekend, three whisky and sodas, telling stories. What a beautiful community spirit! Result: inflated stomachs. These people have their minds and their hearts in their stomachs! They are perfect bourgeois set up as bachelors in a community!”<sup>68</sup> The superior general was not mincing his words here. When the health of the congregation was involved he could use strong and sharp language to indicate the importance of the matter. He said: “Right now I am about to lose

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<sup>66</sup> Op. cit., pp. 594-595.

<sup>67</sup> Op. cit., p. 604.

<sup>68</sup> *Revue d'Iberville*, notes taken by Br. Arthur Dugay, p.92.

seven Brothers from one province. Those Brothers who say, ‘I am unable to do what you ask,’ may well leave right away! I regret their departures but I accept them. I prefer to lose seven Brothers in 1970 and preserve a high spiritual level in a province rather than to allow the easy life and mediocrity to take over little by little and bring about repeated haemorrhages of ten, fifteen, or twenty Brothers a year.’<sup>69</sup>

His admonitions are direct and clear; he puts his finger on the problem: “Having reflected on your character and your worries, my impression is the following: You are to some degree influenced by your milieu and find yourselves in a progressive descent towards comfort, towards a life not only easy materially but spiritually too. For example, ‘I pray when I want; I am sincere and authentic because when I don’t feel like praying, I don’t pray. I pray when I feel a need, and so on.’ Because of these ideas, many are tempted to look more and more for an easier way, for more comfort in their spiritual life. Then the ideal to improve oneself, one’s strength of will, loses its tautness. You need superiors who will help you to go beyond yourselves. You want men who will help you to better yourselves.”<sup>70</sup> Was this morbidity particular to the Canadian Brothers? Not at all! The whole world had found richer and easier ways of living, and our whole Institute was having trouble identifying its limits and resisting the ideas and manners of the world. Basilio very properly praised the 35%-40% of the Canadian Brothers who left their world of abundance to go and work in the missions in Africa and elsewhere where there were few luxuries. . He did not forget to mention that the Canadian provinces were sending a lot of money to the missions.<sup>71</sup> Following this retreat, Canadian Brothers undertook a new expansion of their missionary effort: Madagascar, Haiti...

Even when he was addressing problematic areas – this was his duty as superior – he also indicated what was precious for the spiritual life: “It isn’t normal for a consecrated person to remain

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<sup>69</sup> Op, cit., p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Conference on Poverty, Avila, pain 1972, *Betica Marista* 1972, p. 157.

indifferent to the reception of the Eucharist and frequently miss out on Communion. Above all it is unacceptable for a religious to miss out on daily Mass: the superior then has an obligation to admonish the Brother seriously and directly. It is a misrepresentation of the Council to claim that his conduct reflects its thinking.”<sup>72</sup> In Basilio’s view, such people had developed a tepid love and clouded faith. Then he added, “To take advantage of the liturgy and the sacraments, the serious practice of private prayer is absolutely necessary.”<sup>73</sup>

In this possibility of disaster Brother Basilio liked to quote Father Arrupe: “Nowadays, more than in the recent past, it has become clear that faith is no longer a virtue acquired once and for all, that it can grow weak and that there is a danger of losing it. No, our faith must be constantly renewed, nourished and strengthened. Our faith and hope live in the open air and are put to the test by unbelief and injustice. More than ever this demands on our part a prayer that beseeches faith. Prayer shows us our weakness, banishes purely human securities and the dogmatisms that assail us, and thus prepares us in humility and simplicity to understand what is revealed to the little ones.”<sup>74</sup>

#### 4.6 Summing up the benefits of prayer

Through this play of lights and shadows, Brother Basilio tried to make us understand how indispensable prayer is for the community to become a communion and for our apostolate to be charged with the necessary dynamism. Let us quote a passage of Basilio’s where he summarised the advantages of prayer: “When we deal with men whose hearts are at one with God’s Spirit, who enrich themselves by long meditation, we notice how they change, as men, as apostles or as members of the community. A truly deep prayer life has clear consequences:

- that our shared prayers are true and not superficial,

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<sup>72</sup> Circ.: *Les Appels de l’Eglise...*, p. 386.

<sup>73</sup> Op. cit., p. 389.

<sup>74</sup> *Spiritualité Apostolique*, p. 7.

- that a spirit of listening moulds our hearts. (We speak to God too much. We don't listen to Him enough.)
- that we develop a sense of praise and gratitude. Without the sense of praise, our prayer remains childish, entirely conditioned by self-centredness, self-interest, and personal satisfaction.
- that our lives become evangelical.
- that fraternal charity becomes the fabric of our community lives.
- that there is real depth to our apostolic life characterised as it is by right intentions, detachment and availability, with the result that its authenticity makes a lasting impression on the persons whom we meet.<sup>75</sup>

During the second conference he gave to the capitulants in September 1985, Basilio read an enlightening passage from a document of the Congregation for Religious. The title of the document was, *The contemplative dimension of religious life*: “The contemplative dimension is the true secret of the renewal of all religious life: it renews the vitality of our following of Christ because it leads to an experiential knowledge of the Lord, a knowledge that is necessary for us to give authentic witness, the witness of the one who has heard, who has seen with his own eyes, who has contemplated and touched with his own hands.”<sup>76</sup>

Here is the picture Basilio conceived of the young Brother of the post-conciliar era – it is not difficult to see here the outlines of his own portrait and of the values he loved: “The young Brother we need today must be full of enthusiasm for the Kingdom which must be the centre his life; he must love the congregation and be endowed above all with fidelity, a genuine interior life, and the strength of will to overcome the crises and difficult moments that inevitably arise in the life of every person whether religious or not. He needs to be psychologically mature, accustomed to seeing things from a supernatural perspective. If, in addition to this, the young Brother has other gifts, personal freedom, energy, openness of mind, together with personal qualities like creativity and

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<sup>75</sup> Circ.: *L'Oraison*, pp. N342-343.

<sup>76</sup> *La Spiritualité Chrétienne*, p. 40.

initiative, so much the better.”<sup>77</sup> To achieve this ideal, prayer is absolutely essential.

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<sup>77</sup> Circ.: *Les Appels de l'Eglise...*, pp. 495-496.

## 5

**BASILIO'S UNDERSTANDING OF PRAYER**

Everything that has been presented up to this point, especially the quotations from Basilio's writings, will have provided a good idea of his understanding of prayer. In his *A Talk on Prayer* he devotes no less than 23 pages to four definitions of prayer.<sup>78</sup> His definitions are at times simple and at other moments quite dense. Elsewhere we find prayer encapsulated in brief and lucid phrases, while in other places his reflection is long and detailed as he touches on the universe of prayer. We could say that these definitions comprise a body of theory, but at the same time they derive from his experience of prayer, for they take much from his own life. He seems to generalise from his own case. Hence our interest in the definitions – they give us a glimpse of his inner life. This circular brings together, almost word for word, the conferences that he gave at Logroño, Spain, during the summer of 1972. But there was one particular reflection not published in the circular, almost certainly because it was so personal, and in any case it could only be truly captured by those who were actually present”

“On occasions, God reveals Himself in our hearts during our prayers. This is very possible: it is a prayer of such a value, of such a weight of mercy, of such a power that one can be held for three or five days in a remarkable atmosphere where the heart seems in pain. It is a kind of subconscious state that makes us forget the present moment, and become unconcerned about what is happening. One is wrapped in, plunged in this atmosphere, which is the lingering echo of an extremely privileged time of prayer, which has been a gift of God.<sup>79</sup> That type of prayer is rarely man's product. It is God's gift. It is not possible without God's graciousness, and it leaves us with a sense of grace, a sense of the Gospel, felt at the same time as both a warmth and pain that

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<sup>78</sup> Circ.: *A Talk on Prayer*, pp. 493-516.

<sup>79</sup> *Llamamiento à la renovación*, No. 1, pp. 8-9, October 1972.

wraps us in an atmosphere of prayer for three or five days...” We cannot help thinking that Basilio is describing his own experience. Now, returning to the circular, we observe his first definition:

“Prayer is the beginning, the essence and the anticipation of transcendence.”<sup>80</sup> Basilio explained immediately that prayer is not, in the first place, something functional, something useful: it is a way of being, it is being before God: “Prayer is not an ‘I am for such or such a thing’, but simply an ‘I am’, with all the exigencies of being.” He gives the example of something that happened while he was giving the Brothers a retreat at Avila. “After the retreat a few Brothers full of zeal went to visit a courageous man, Juan, who was suffering from a terminal disease. These Brothers asked Juan, ‘What will eternal life be for you?’ He simply answered, ‘I will continue what I am doing right now, I will contemplate!’ Basilio became more precise: “Prayer is the beginning, the first lisp of a dialogue which eventually develops to its full splendour”. Understood in this way, prayer already has its value: it is the indispensable dialogue with our Creator. “In a strict sense, prayer is talking lovingly with God thanks to faith. To speak to God without faith is not prayer. Speaking to God without love is not prayer either. Prayer is speaking to God in a universe of faith and love.”<sup>81</sup>

The second definition is more complex: “Prayer, as the preoccupation of the mind with God, is a vital necessity for a Christian.”<sup>82</sup> Basilio then defines the Christian: “...not someone who “practises”, but someone filled with the life of Christ, in whom Christ and the spirit of Christ dwells. If he lives with the Spirit of Jesus Christ, it is in the measure that baptism surges up within him like a rising tide, invading his heart, head, critical judgment and conscience... *There the need of prayer makes itself felt.*” Given this definition of the Christian we may well infer that this is exactly how Basilio himself lived: he lived by Christ and by the Spirit of Christ present in his heart, head, critical judgment and

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<sup>80</sup> Circ.: *Entretien sur la prière*, pp. 493-496.

<sup>81</sup> *Llamamiento a la renovación*, No. 1, p. 8, October 1972.

<sup>82</sup> Circ.: *Entretien sur la prière*, pp. 496-502.

conscience, lived with the love of Christ, with the mind of Christ, with the critical judgment of Christ and with the conscience of Christ. This sheds light on some frequent phrases of Basilio that turn up in different forms such as, “Christ is me and I am Christ.”

Apart from prayer, are there other ways to reach this stage? How can one live this ideal if not through prayer, which keeps the ideal alive in one’s consciousness? Basilio goes into greater detail: “Fundamentally, prayer is an exercise of faith. But faith is dialogue. Prayer does not mean ruminating on what one believes - it consists of speaking ‘with’, ‘about’, or ‘because’. It asks for what is pleasing to it without this being a matter of faith. It gives expression to the love already beating in the heart. Yes, basically, that is what prayer consists of.... Really, Christian prayer is not confined to the prayer of petition. It is a dialogue of faith and hope - a faith that is in contact with the world and a hope that is involved in the battle of the world.”

Basilio then establishes a kind of parallel between prayer and the Church: the actions attributed to the one may also be attributed to the other: “Christian prayer is a dialogue in faith, a dialogue in hope. It is granted to a Church, which has been described in a fine concept as the chaste-prostitute. Chaste prostitute indeed, this Church which leads men to sanctity through sin, which preserves the vision of the Gospel while confronted ceaselessly with the harsh realities of every day, which is sensitive to the changing tempo of the times and nevertheless, in the throes of travail, longs for the redemption which she always seems to be about to attain without having done so yet. Prayer becomes hope, which begets the prayer of petition this form of prayer is only another cry for redemption, being at the same time a cry of thanksgiving, because redemption is already there.”<sup>83</sup>

The third definition is the most complex one: “Prayer is a manifestation of the divinity in human form, a merciful manifestation by which God assumes our humanity and prays.” He explains further: “Man tends to become Christ in prayer. Even

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<sup>83</sup> Circ.: *Entretien sur la prière*, p. 500.

if that is singular and may appear exaggerated, nevertheless it is real.” He refers to the case of the child still in his mother’s womb. It is a new life that grows through the mother’s life. Similarly, Basilio regards our being in Christ as a sharing of the communion the Son enjoys with the Father. He said, “When a man prays and his life is truly Christian, it is Christ, the first born of Mary who prays in him; his prayer is nothing other than the life of Christ expressed in words.”<sup>84</sup> Our prayer is taken over by Christ and repeated by Him to the Father. It is important to know that when I pray I am not alone, Christ prays in me and with me. This is why the Father will surely hear this prayer. As Basilio was conscious and convinced of this, this is how he prayed, his voice and his heart both at the disposal of the Lord. All true prayer is taken over by Christ and is also a participation in Christ’s prayer.<sup>85</sup>

The fourth definition describes prayer as “an intimate cry of the heart to God of three different persons, or aspects of the same person within me, in the varied dynamisms and different zones of development in life.” Recognising that this definition was quite abstract he explained it in detail. “First, prayer is a cry, a voice, an expression. Christianity is not a mentality, a system of thought; nor is it primarily a moral code or cult. It is a life shared by persons in unity, interpersonal in the sense of individual sharing: Jesus and I and the Father. Jesus and I are two, but we are also one, because Jesus and I are the Church. Christianity is above all a life and a company, a life of persons with other persons, and so a life where one speaks, not a life of solitude and silence.”

The “I” may be either alone, or a member of the Church or a member of a community. Sometimes, one prays about what is important in the depths of one’s heart, but when one prays as a member of the Church or of a community these two must be present together with all their relationships with life. Basilio said, “We must care to include in prayer what reflects true life or indicates the desire to be true. If we can look at the world with an evangelical eye this world will fit in our prayer. If not, our prayer

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<sup>84</sup> Op. cit., pp. 502-505.

<sup>85</sup> Constitutions, No. 64.

will be out of place. The ideal of prayer is to transform whatever is inhuman into a human state. The apostle's heart must be urged on by the history of salvation. Prayer is an expression of the heart. It is not the head that prays but the heart. It is an expression from the heart to God, from three persons, the community, the Church and myself – as much from one as from another, at the meeting point of different charisms.”

However, for Basilio, Christ remains essentially present in all prayer: “Christian life, at its roots, is a life within a Life, because we are sons in the Son, because the Son, the first born of God is also the unique Son of God. God's only son is Jesus; either we are sons in Him or we are sons in nobody!”<sup>86</sup> We rediscover here one of Basilio's key ideas: the deep union that exists between Christ and the Christian is like the fusion of two persons where none disappears but both acquire a greater plenitude.

Prayer is a rendezvous, a dialogue of communion and love where the “I” meets God, the Church, the world and the community. But as far as the “I” is concerned, let us remember that Christ takes my prayer and expresses it to the Father along with the joys and the sufferings of the Church, of the community and of the world. It is a situation, which is both the proclamation and the beginning of eternity. We have to admit that this is an original way of defining prayer, but of course, this was not a definition found in books, but one dictated by a living experience.

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<sup>86</sup> Circ.: *Entretien sur la prière*, p. 509.

## 6

**A MASTER OF PRAYER**

A studious reading of Brother Basilio's writings, together with testimonies from the persons he directed, brings us close to one who has a depth of knowledge, who is an expert and an apostle of prayer. He is seen to have had a great understanding of human life and as having been endowed with rare judgement.

**6.1 His depth of knowledge**

Basilio is a master in the knowledge of the universe of prayer. He can speak of the thresholds, rhythms, stages, tasks and structures, of times and places, of the different types of prayer. He knew all that could be said about prayer and the concrete context in which people live. Here is how he saw the prayer situation in our Congregation in 1979 – he was giving a talk to the major superiors of a number of religious congregations, and he said: “Our 1967 general chapter produced a statement on prayer that was perhaps the weakest of all its documents, and so it was not a great help towards renewal. Our task was that of Paul, to bring our Brothers from the law to freedom by becoming men of the Spirit. But we should have been realistic and understood that there are ‘times and moments’<sup>87</sup>

Saint Paul accomplished his task at a time of great fervour for Christian values that were quite new. On the other hand, we were facing a period of crisis that eroded much of the arena of prayer and was questioning the validity and the usefulness of contemplative life. Moreover, we had to deal with poorly trained men, superficially equipped in spirituality.” He added that, in saying this, he was a realist, and had no nostalgia for the past whatever. “May God preserve me from failing to acknowledge the

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<sup>87</sup> Eph 5:16; Col 4:5, 1 Thess 5:1

great advantages that the Council and the chapter have brought us in many areas, but inevitably, we have to navigate in the sea where the Lord placed our ship.”<sup>88</sup>

Whenever we find any of Basilio’s writings on prayer we cannot resist drawing on them freely because we feel that they teach us, nourish our souls and put us into contact with an expert. That explains the numerous quotations in the second part of this chapter.

## 6.2 An expert

Learned as he was on the subject of prayer, and certainly on the theology of prayer, he was much more still: he was an expert inasmuch as he prayed a great deal, and talked of prayer from the fullness of his heart and from the extensive time he spent with the Lord. He was an expert, too, because as spiritual director of so many, he had the opportunity to know the depths of others where the Holy Spirit, great artist that he is, day by day refines his masterpieces. In his circular on *Meditation* he wrote, “I will therefore take into account my many years of experience of profound contacts with the Brothers, as well as my own experience of strong and weak moments in my prayer. I will also give great weight to the Church’s tradition – the teaching of so many men and women who have had an experience of God.”<sup>89</sup>

Basilio liked to repeat regularly the following quotation from a letter Saint Peter of Alcantara sent to Saint Teresa of Avila. Saint Peter reprimanded her for seeking advice from theologians and canon law experts in her endeavour to reform the Carmel: “If it were a question of a tribunal or differences of opinion you might well have recourse to them; but surely you know that in matters of holiness you ask for help only from the saints, for nobody can give you any advice beyond what he himself lives?”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> *La Contemplation dans l’Action*, p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> *Circ.: L’Oraison*, p. 334.

<sup>90</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 330.

It is evident that Basilio's advice came from his own daily experience, although he was convinced that he was not especially endowed with spiritual wealth.<sup>91</sup> So, he could insist, on the basis of his own life experience, that prayer was not a series of exercises but was "living the best adventure, walking in union with God, aiming at intimacy with Him, seeking the fullness of God's love. 'Where your treasure is there is your heart also.' To this we might add, "and where your heart are, there is your very being."<sup>92</sup>

### 6.3 The apostle and the brother

What motivated his circulars, *A Talk on Prayer and Meditation* was the falling away from prayer and meditation that had spread through so many groups of people after the Council. These two circulars are luminous and enthusiastic appeals to return to prayer and meditation. In many pages, we recognise the apostle who wants to convince, who uses all his intelligence to show fallacies for what they were and to express with delicacy the value of dialogue with God. To the Provincials first, then to all the Brothers he said, "We are invited to open wide the gates of our Congregation to the Lord, to let in the true sunlight in order that God be given the first place. Yes, generosity, praise and attention to God must be given their due place so that we shall be open to the Spirit who can work within us, evangelise us, and mould our hearts as he wishes."<sup>93</sup> His purpose was really to convince the Brothers to try to experience God's friendship in prayer, to find joy in a calm and creative community prayer, to rediscover the happiness to be found in praying with Christ, especially at the Eucharist, and to offer themselves freely for the Spirit to pray in them.

Basilio was a convinced man who possessed the art of convincing. He knew where life really is and he showed the Brothers the

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<sup>91</sup> Op. cit., p. 329.

<sup>92</sup> Op. cit., pp. 351-352.

<sup>93</sup> Op. cit., p. 334.

various paths leading to its source. In this sense, he was really a master of life. He still is, because he knows our community life style, our joys, our work. He is also aware of our difficulties, our different encounters and our worries. His great many travels and contacts kept him informed of concrete situations; he spent his time with the Brothers and welcomed them for private discussion. In this way, his enquiries allowed him to learn secrets that are often easier to write than to tell. His reflection on prayer is bursting with practical observations. Life nourishes prayer; prayer is the light that accompanies life and fills it with hope.

These observations and snippets of advice foreshadowed the **Marist Apostolic Spirituality** that was proposed mainly by Brother Benito, after the 1993 chapter: “If we look at the world with an evangelical eye, it will find its due place. Otherwise, our prayers will be out of place.”<sup>94</sup> More explicitly, he wrote, “We must care to insert into our prayers the truth of life or our desire for it. In this way, a prayer will no longer be a random little push; it will have the power and the constancy of an engine.”<sup>95</sup> In the *Appendix on Creativity in Community Prayer*, he has this paragraph which could be a definition of Marist Apostolic Spirituality: “Have the community in a state of awareness, so that its prayer reflects not something unworldly, but daily events in their time and place. The community prays about this and thanks God for its past and thus relives it. It prays about its present concerns, and it studies the future. According to circumstances, it accepts what the future holds out or decides on another course.”<sup>96</sup> A few pages further he adds, “This is why, the more ‘existential’ this prayer is the more it represents the true man and the truth of the man.”<sup>97</sup> Given that a man prays at a certain time and in a certain place a community prayer must include the life, the situation, the circumstances, the history of the community members and of the community itself. It is necessary for the community to pray its life and that as a result its life be transformed.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Circ.: *Entretien sur la prière*, p. 514.

<sup>95</sup> Op. cit., p. 513.

<sup>96</sup> Circ.: *Appendice sur la créativité dans la prière communautaire*, p. 564.

<sup>97</sup> Op. cit., p. 571.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

Brother Basilio had chosen a very meaningful title for the conference he gave to the Major Superiors in 1979: *From Action to Contemplation*. He observed that there was something missing in the contemplative dimension of the Brothers' life. If indeed we want to remain men called by Christ to live fully for Him according to His Gospel, in the world's sight and for men's good, we must make sure

- that we significantly develop the contemplative dimension in our lives,
- that our contemplation be linked to our real lives and oriented towards a specific action.

Otherwise, our lives will never be unified, there will be a constant tension between action and contemplation...and it is in regard to the latter that we feel most deprived. We have not yet succeeded in making the spiritual synthesis suited to our vocation, one devised expressly for men of apostolic spirituality.”<sup>99</sup>

Keenly aware of our lives as Brothers, Basilio offered some suggestions that were so sensible that we cannot help agreeing with him. Here are a few: “It is quite idiotic to say, ‘I pray when I feel like it because I want to be authentic.’ If we live in this way we will pray less and less.”<sup>100</sup> He invites us to be creative and true in our community prayers, but he warns us, “You don’t bring about a true community prayer in the way you would take your handkerchief from your pocket; a good personal meditation does not come as a piece of luck. Labour, effort and method are needed.”<sup>101</sup> And then, a remark that takes us by surprise: “To feel at ease within your own skin may be no small proof of spiritual health.”<sup>102</sup> He goes on to say, “There are some Brothers who drop the necessary detergent against worldly reflections into the washing machine but they forget to insert something to be washed! They talk of prayer but they don’t pray.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> *La contemplation à partir de l'action*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>100</sup> *Circ.: Entretien sur la prière*, pp. 523-524.

<sup>101</sup> *Op. cit.*, p.534.

<sup>102</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 540.

<sup>103</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 519.

Theology is sound when it keeps things simple. Thanks to Basilio there are old questions about prayer that are no longer asked, for example, “Does action get in the way of prayer, or is it better than prayer?” Basilio demonstrated our need to set aside enough time for intimacy with God in our celebration times. Serious married couples reserve moments for one another only, moments that have no other use than for being together and reinforcing their mutual love. He demythologised formalism in our prayer. Praying is not simply reciting what has been prepared beforehand, as in Lauds or Vespers, but addressing ourselves to God with attentiveness, respect, tranquillity and truth. Sometimes, a single psalm well recited, meditated, shared, and assimilated by the heart has more prayer value than all the psalms of Lauds recited at full speed or monotonously. It is the heart that is important in prayer and “one must not forget that a man’s life is made for love. ‘To love’ is a transitive verb, even for the celibate - above all for the celibate.”<sup>104</sup> He points out very properly: ”In the spiritual life, as prayer improves in quality and quantity, it becomes more simple, more stable, more integrative, and, in the best sense of the term, more uniform ... in the unchanging form of love.”<sup>105</sup>

#### **6.4 In the company of the master, the expert, the apostle, our brother**

Walking with Basilio in prayer we rediscover the Father and we feel warmed by his love; we meet Jesus and we become like him letting him leave the imprint of his person more clearly on our own personalities. We open our hearts fully to allow the Spirit to inhabit us and to pray as he prays in Jesus, using the only word that is the whole of the Son’s prayer, “Abba, Father!”

Reading Basilio, we long to pray. His pages often recall our best spiritual experiences, our most beautiful intimate moments with God. He speaks of joys that we already know, but he does not

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<sup>104</sup> Op. cit., p. 522.

<sup>105</sup> Circ.: *Appendice sur la créativité dans la prière communautaire*, p. 562.

omit the more difficult moments of aridity we have to endure also. We feel so close to him that he almost seems to be our better self.

For him, personal prayer is the meeting of two friends: God and the one who prays. The heart of prayer is love and sincerity. Basilio insists on sincerity in prayer, on speaking to God as we are, and what we are, whatever venture – human, ecclesial, or communitarian – stirs in us, speaking to him with a spontaneity that, while free from formulas, maintains coherence, that is to say, brings our life into harmony with what it is to live with God.

While Basilio is a real master in prayer it is unfortunate that he is not read enough. That is hardly his fault. He gave us the best of himself, he gave us what he was when he lived his intimate moments with the Lord. Here is the last paragraph from his circular on *Meditation*:<sup>106</sup> “I ask the Father from whom every good gift comes to grant you to taste the tenderness of his love for us. I beg him to lead us to the path that leads intimacy with him, to live this hidden life with God in Christ Jesus that Saint Paul spoke about and which Champagnat and our first Brothers knew well.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Circ.: *L'Oraison*, pp. 363-364.

<sup>107</sup> Direct contact with the writings, or at least with the selection of texts offered at the end of this booklet, will strengthen our conviction that to find ourselves in the company of Basilio is truly to have the opportunity to be with a master of the spiritual life.

## 7

**BASILIO'S INITIATIVES TO ENHANCE OUR PRAYER**

In this regard, we let Brother Basilio's words speak for themselves. In a talk he gave to major superiors in 1979, significantly entitled *Contemplation, the Starting Point for Action*, he first analysed the prayer situation in our Institute. Having found a number of weaknesses, he listed the steps he had taken to allow prayer and contemplation to take a really central position in the Brothers' lives: "This is what we have tried to do, and have been trying to do for some years:

1. After a first hesitant moment, the Brothers have started to make serious retreats where the accent is on silence, shared prayer, contemplation and attention to the elements of our charism. (We know that during his first mandate Basilio had stressed the renewal requested by Vatican II. During the retreats of that period, especially those that he gave in Spain in 1972, the recurring themes were the Council, its documents and its requirements concerning renewal, unity and charity as the only acceptable way to undertake this renewal successfully, and an analysis of the Council's decree. Then, there were various treatments of contemplation which dealt with many different aspects: the theology of contemplation; the growth of baptismal life, meditation and life, meditation and the use of time, meditation and liturgy, community prayer, growth in the prayer life, the difficulties and objections against contemplation and mental prayer today." He added that given the need to choose from these, prayer is the one that should be chosen most often. And that is what he had done.)<sup>108</sup>

2. There was a new openness to the various prayer initiatives that had emerged during the previous five to ten years: prayer groups, houses of prayer, the burgeoning literature on prayer, correspondence courses in prayer...

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<sup>108</sup> AFM. 73 06 034.

3. Many Brothers were in touch with the Focolarini with a view to enhancing their way of living the Gospel (the Word of life) in the middle of their daily lives and their ordinary activities.

4. During the 1976 general chapter, the capitulants evinced their concern about the numerous forces that were making competing claims on the Brothers: a community life to renew, a greater commitment to apostolic work and calls for a deeper contemplative life. The PAC (Prayer, Apostolate, Community) document had three objectives:

- To unify the elements that make up our Marist life by trying to combine humility and realism, an integration that, as St Augustine says, requires a “delicate balance”.

- To identify exactly each of these elements by trying to plan, live and finally define the kind of community, contemplative life and apostolic life that could really be ours, and how to unify these elements.

- To allow each Brother, in harmony with his own personal call, to find the locus of this integration in a manner sensitive to the movement imparted to him by the Holy Spirit .

5. From that time on the General Council has been vigorously engaged in the animation of the congregation along these lines. The great majority of the thirteen members of the Council spend at least eight months of the year in this way (even at the risk of neglecting their administrative responsibilities). Among these tasks of renewal, the first priority is given to the animation of the ordinary prayer of the communities.

6. In this effort very special attention was given to the renewal of the Eucharist. Next, the other community prayers were sensitively modified. Finally, with great delicacy, attention was moved, little by little, and not without success, to the experience of shared prayer or to an enlivened celebration of the Eucharist.

7. Most recently we have attacked the problem of meditation, in the strict sense of the word. Efforts in this direction have been

maintained as a priority. During the next eighteen months the Council will work on this, putting themselves under scrutiny and trying to communicate the results of their experience to the Institute. (In regard to this, Basilio added further: “By way of example, I can let it be known that we are trying to organise a number of weeks dedicated specifically to meditation, not to every kind of prayer. The Brothers have been informed that this does not refer to community prayer – other efforts have been made in this regard. The number of input sessions has been reduced to ensure ample time each day (7-8 hours) for guided meditation which will be accompanied by a person chosen from priests or Brothers who already have a serious and stable contemplative life... We see that, more and more, it is necessary for us to prepare and co-ordinate our own resources, since on the one hand the number of priests has diminished, and on the other a number of them have chosen to work in fields other than spiritual direction and guidance in contemplation.)

So we come to the present moment: as you see, the last idea of the general council was to concentrate on us ourselves. Let me explain: In fact, having to a great extent depended upon outsiders rather than on the resources that come from within, we now wish to draw upon the help of men of prayer and contemplative experience among us. So I have just asked all our houses to make the following contribution; that anonymously, the Brothers who wish to take part in the revitalisation of our spirit of prayer in keeping with our apostolic spirituality send us, in all simplicity, a summary of their prayer life, with its contents and its style, mentioning above all how they learned to pray, how they maintained their prayer life and what level they have reached today.

These efforts had been preceded by the circular, *Community Life*, of 19 March 1978, followed by the circular on the *Community Life Project* of 21 November 1980 and the one on *Meditation* of 8 September 1982.

Those circulars included a particular emphasis on prayer. In *The Community Project* Basilio indicated that he wished to establish “the universal novitiate”<sup>109</sup>, with a view to evangelising the community, entering deeply into the charism of the Institute, reconsecrating our religious life, unifying our life, leading us to apostolic prayer and building communities completely turned towards Christ, “in Him, through Him, for Him”. The circular, of course, was broader than this, embracing, as it did, all aspects of community life, but the spiritual dimension is always present.

In this effort to enhance the Brothers’ prayer life there were two great conferences that Basilio gave to the capitulants at the 1985 General Chapter; the first of these treated Christian Spirituality and the second, Marist Apostolic Spirituality. The latter was a very dense but clear reflection on the spirituality appropriate for the Marist Brother and on the means to acquire it. This was an important stage in the effort that would be made later to define Marist apostolic spirituality – he shed light on all its essential elements. Concluding this conference, Basilio made the following recommendations: “Very concretely, I suggest three points in the great silence that we are living:

- long hours of meditation and contemplation
- community prayers of great fervour
- living our fraternal relationships and our chapter concerns in a climate of prayer.

I feel it is worthwhile to present a summary of Basilio’s efforts towards prayer renewal in our family: the page indicates the richness of his endeavours, but even so it is almost certainly incomplete.

1. 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1968 circular: *The Calls of the Church and the Founder*: twenty pages on prayer
2. Series of retreats on Renewal that aimed at helping the
3. Brothers in the shift from the law to the Spirit  
*Vocal Meditation of a superior general.*
4. Circular: *A Talk on Prayer*

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<sup>109</sup> Circ.: *Projet Communautaire*, p. 7.

5. Retreats on Meditation and Contemplation
6. His invitation to learn from the prayer movements
7. Contact with the Focolarini
8. Chapter document: PAC :*Prayer – Apostolate – Community*
9. The whole general council engaged in the animation of ordinary prayer eight months a year.
10. A special care to assure a central place for the Eucharist.
11. His effort to encourage the habit of shared prayer.
12. One year and a half of effort to improve meditation in the whole institute.
13. Organisation of weeks of prayer with seven to eight hours of meditation daily.
14. Preparation of Brothers to be available as a resource for prayer.
15. Circulars: *Obedience, Mary in our Life, Meditation, The Champagnat Year and the Community Project.*
16. The Hermitage transformed into a Marist sanctuary.
17. The two conferences to the 1985 capitulants: Christian Spirituality and Marist Apostolic Spirituality
18. The preparation of more evangelical Constitutions
19. Spiritual direction taken up by many Brothers
20. Letters as means of spiritual direction.

Basilio was to be admired for all those efforts; we are studying a responsible and apostolic man. Can we say that he succeeded in making us pray more and in a better way?

These days, there are two currents in our Institute: they have probably always been present under different forms. A large number of Brothers did listen to Basilio: they have given more time to contemplation, they hold calm community prayers free of rigid formalism, more creative, and more in touch with the community, the Church and the world. The Eucharistic liturgies have become more meaningful, more central to community life, true celebrations. Those belonging to this group have been taking personal responsibility for the quality of their spiritual life. It seems to me that in the Institute today there are many communities like this.

But the other current that draws Brothers towards a minimal spiritual life has not entirely disappeared. These Brothers allow themselves to be more influenced by the spirit of the world and middle class comfort than by the inspiration of the Spirit. To be truthful, we have to say that this conflict is present in a hidden way in everyone's heart. Even a generous Brother is not exempt from the attractions of comfort; but the one who makes comfort an end in itself, is his conscience undisturbed by this? Basilio said that a religious person had to be guided by a magnanimous and a generous spirit, by the law of the Spirit. In short, we must never take it easy and declare that we have done enough!

Those pages presenting Basilio as a man of prayer are certainly rich. They touch the theology of prayer, the heart of prayer, sincerity and prayer, life and prayer. Really, in Basilio's universe, prayer is like a pearl kept in a case, the case being the whole vast spiritual world. In this world, we find apostolic spirituality, efforts towards renewal along the lines of Vatican II, the Church as the Body of Christ and Mother of the faithful, and the world as the object of God's love and at the same time the masterpiece of his creation that God places in our hands to make it fruitful, the Virgin Mary and her maternal presence, the Founder with his holiness, his charism, and his mission. We find the great enthusiasm of our first Brothers, new apostolic frontiers with the poor and the missions, a longer formation leading the Brothers to greater maturity. Even better still, we have Basilio with us always as a concrete example of prayer, sensitivity to the Brothers, self-denial and work. Today's generations believe more in witnesses than in teachers and if they do believe in teachers it is because they are also witnesses.<sup>110</sup> Basilio has been among us as both teacher and witness.

All his efforts brought about a better encounter with God and a stronger and more constant evangelisation of the heart, so that

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<sup>110</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

religious life enjoyed a greater appeal and made more sense. He also wanted to prepare the Brothers for a fast developing world marked by secularism that seems more and more to put itself at a distance from God. This world encloses us, presses in on us from all sides, making it impossible for us to escape breathing in values that are far from those of the Gospel. Yet, with Vatican II, we have chosen not to flee the world and live far from the world, but to live in the world and for the world, where we desire to bring the light of Christ, and love our world as Basilio did. In view of this, his efforts to enhance our prayer life were perfectly justified and indispensable.

Perhaps it will be preferable to allow the reader more direct contact with Basilio by choosing some of his best passages on prayer. Nothing could be more effective than the impact they make and the conviction they carry.

One should not be put off by the number of pages; they are all of great value. You are invited to read them slowly to avoid the discomfort caused by a surfeit of good things!

## TEXTS

### **Text 1: How to arrive at true prayer**

My dear Brothers, basing my statement on the teaching of the Founder, I have sought not only to recall his life, some of his works and counsels that he would most probably have given us had he been with us at this time, but even more, to develop the dialectics of prayer, from its growth as a felt need in the individual soul up to its ecclesial and cosmic fullness. This has been a long digression, but if I have dwelt so long on the point it is because I am convinced that the abandonment of prayer which is becoming general in certain places is matched by the outlandish ideas circulating on prayer in other places; these same ideas are often accompanied by attitudes which spring not from weakness or weariness, but from explicit and formal theories quite foreign to the Gospel and to the quest for holiness.

Allow me to say very modestly that if I had to choose between the magisterium of the Church and the theologians, I would place myself on the side of the magisterium; and if I had to choose between the counsels of the theologians and those of the saints, I would prefer the latter. Perhaps I am being simple or naïve. May the Lord preserve this naiveté!

We should recall that far from encouraging us to abandon prayer, the Council invites us, on the contrary, to devote ourselves to it as best we can; and if up to now our prayer has not been free from a certain formalism, from now on it has to be more genuine and personal.

I do not believe that it is a question of more or less time for prayer, but of reaching a life of prayer that is genuine, and also adapted to our needs; at the same time, convincing ourselves that it is impossible to be a good religious and to do good, without a serious application to prayer. Finally, while the kingdom of God is growing in our heart, we must strive to live and endure with

patience the efforts that prayer now costs us; at the same time hopefully looking forward to that day when we will see and converse familiarly with God the Father face to face in eternity.

(Circ. 2 January 1968 – *The Appeals of the Church*, pp. 562-564)

### **Text 2: Vocation animated by spiritual life**

*Basilio is looking at the qualities of a formator: maturity, the art of communication, renewal according to Vatican II, fatherliness, a deep concern for his task, and finally, a healthy spiritual life.*

This quality is all-important. It seems to me now the most crucial quality of all. I don't mean that, if it is present, there is no need of others. No, if it exists in the absence of the others, education will end in failure, for the simple reason that God rarely acts through continuous miracles. What I am saying rather, is that I am greatly concerned when I see a formation team full of vitality, with an abundance of plans and projects, but giving no evidence in their persons of the fullness of God; who convey no sensation of a soul plunged in faith and living a spiritual experience; whose heart does not burn with the fire of the love of God, of his Church and of his plan of salvation. Even more is needed. There must be a real taste for religious life and one's own congregation; we must believe in this life, take it up with all its consequences, fully convinced of its worth. Idealism is blended with realism, for our vocation must not be reduced to a myth. One who has lived an adult experience has clearly felt the limits of realism and myths are henceforth repudiated. In this case a vocation can no longer be mythical. The Church herself, like all the rest of the universe, has her limits and imperfections. The mature man is one who undertakes what he believes in and who believes in what he has taken on. He lives out, amongst the deficiencies of real life, the constant rejuvenation of his ideal.

(Circ. January 1968 – *The Appeals of the Church*, pp. 456-457)

### **Text 3: Prayer without coherence means evasion**

To say, what is the use of prayer for action, or to take refuge in prayer to escape action is equally inappropriate. Prayer does not indicate an attitude of “I am for this, or that.” It implies an “I am”, but an “I am” comprising all the demands of my nature. Even in the prayer of petition I cannot confine myself to the petition. “Lord, give bread to those who have none” ought to oblige me to the corollary, “What am I doing to give bread to those who have none?”

Our Christian heart only functions when there is systole and diastole. Without this double movement, prayer and action, our prayer is an evasion. We have always recognised this in the individual order. I know very well that if I say, “Lord, make me pure”, without doing anything to be pure, I am deceiving myself. But what goes without saying when it concerns the individual has not always been true of the social, political or institutional order. Strange, isn't it?

So, before speaking about the usefulness of prayer, one has to speak of its transcendental or eschatological nature, which is its first dimension. At the end of the world, prayer will change its formula: there will no longer be entreaty; eschatology alone will be prayer. Let me give an example. On the occasion of a retreat at Avila, some Brothers, zealously disposed, paid a visit at the end of the retreat to a certain Juan, a good fellow who was suffering from an incurable disease. Among other things, they asked him: “What will eternal life mean for you?” “Doing what I am doing just now.” he answered, “contemplating.”

You see - this changes everything. We must admit that this vision of prayer: pure, profound, perfect, has not always been understood. And yet, fundamentally considered, the future begins in the present in our interior dispositions, in the various forms of our faith and to the extent that the heart opens up to embrace humanity and weld all hearts into one.

(Circ. *A Talk on Prayer*, pp. 484-485, 1<sup>st</sup> Nov. 1973)

#### **Text 4: Useful for itself**

I insist on this idea. Prayer in itself is the beginning, the first lisp of a dialogue that will open up with time into all its splendour. It is the essence, the anticipation of transcendence. So, instead of wasting our time inquiring whether it has its useful aspect or not, whether our worship is to take the form of a payer or not, I believe that we must lay hold of the definition given above which is of value for all Christians including those who are not vowed to a life of consecration such as the religious life or priesthood. It is not so long ago that attempts were made to bring the Gospel into various areas of life – the conjugal, the social, etc. As for prayer and worship, they had long been the subject of study. But the greater attention paid to other Christian values – love, work, political and social involvement – was to produce a dialectic encounter, and the great question was to arise: How has prayer any value, meaning, utility for action in time and in the world? After a lot of stammering about its utility, the central point was reached: prayer has its own value.

To grasp this, one must first of all ask oneself what is meant by being a Christian. Not someone who “practises”, but someone filled with the life of Christ, in whom Christ and the Spirit of Christ dwell. If he lives with the Spirit of Jesus Christ, it is in the measure that Baptism surges up within him like a rising tide, invading his heart, head, critical judgment and conscience. These latter constitute the various subjective elements operating in life, action and undertakings. But keeping to the purely psychological sphere, it may be said that where the effects of baptism rise up within one, there the need of prayer *makes itself felt*. And if one does not feel the need of prayer, one must ask why, for it is not normal for a Christian who has reached a certain level not to experience this need. (Circ. *A Talk on Prayer*, pp. 485-486)

#### **Text 5: The immense evangelising power of prayer**

Man needs to give expression to his feelings. Every man whose experiences have been profound and who is unable to communicate them suffers a real mutilation of spirit, because he is

obliged to live in solitude and bury the finest and most fruitful things in his life.

Baptismal life makes prayer a necessity because prayer is the most efficacious means of evangelising the human heart that has not yet learnt the full Gospel message. What the heart keeps saying, it finishes by feeling, and by translating what it has learnt into action and life.

It is therefore necessary to pay attention to this immense power of prayer for evangelisation. Not advertent to this fact, many religious today are emptying themselves of the Gospel and filling themselves up with non-evangelical anthropology.

*(A Talk on Prayer, p.490-491)*

**Text 6: Where there is no prayer, there is no religious life.**

Can one remain a Christian without praying, or, is prayer such an essential element in the Christian life that if it falls below a certain level Christian life is endangered? Yes indeed, it must be said that prayer is a vital necessity of the Christian life. Whoever lives the Christian life ought to discover, sooner or later, and as his life becomes more Christian, his need for prayer. To feel the need for prayer does not mean thereby knowing how to pray, but it is always a starting point. During a retreat of the General Council, a Councillor General brought up the following case: a Brother does not rise for prayers regularly, giving as an excuse that he is not well and cannot get up at that time, that he has classes afterwards with no time left for prayer. The preacher of the retreat then asked: “Does this Brother suffer from being prevented from praying and passing his life without a prayer? Answer, no. The preacher continued: this Brother ought to leave the religious life. When there is no prayer there is no religious life, and if there is no religious life what meaning can the vows have.”

*(A Talk on Prayer, pp. 491-492)*

**Text 7: My life, a love mystery**

Fundamentally, Christian life is a mystery of love, and love expresses itself in two ways, both of which are necessary, by speaking and doing, expressing what one feels and doing what one feels, since there are two dimensions, the dimension of action and that of living. And so, all polarisation in which we take refuge, whether it be action to escape prayer, or prayer to avoid action and involvement, are two false reflections of Christianity and two very clear proofs that the Spirit of Jesus and the life of Jesus have not “caught on” with us... What does this thought mean? That there cannot be the slightest Christian sentiment without Christian action. It is the same love, making two imperative demands... When it enters into the field of consciousness the Christian mystery enters as faith, as love, as hope, all lived in Christ. There we have another dimension of prayer that brings us to the question – Can the Christian life exist without prayer? Answer: no. Absence of prayer = absence of Christian life, and poverty of prayer = poverty of Christian life.

(Circ. *A Talk on Prayer*, p. 496)

**Text 8: Action does not replace prayer.**

Those who say that prayer is meaningless, a waste of time, are speaking theoretically and not from experience. It is easily said that action is prayer, but that only shows a lack of practical experience of prayer. Nor do I want to waste any time discussing such a superficial argument. If it is advanced, I answer: “You have no experience of real prayer. If you knew what it was, you would not confuse it with action, even if both are the expression of love.”

People face you with these phrases which have a flashy brilliance about them, but which are in reality only empty talk and evidence of lack of balance. The person using them has not given due attention to the various elements of the Christian life. For example, he has disturbed the harmony that should exist between activity and living and, as so often happens, the moral order gets precedence over the spiritual, and there we have again Christian life conceived as a code of do’s and don’ts, different from those of

a past generation and treating more of the social than the sexual, but still reflecting the same imbalance.

*(A Talk on Prayer, pp. 505-506)*

**Text 9: Prayer is essentially a gift.**

Prayer is, at one and the same time, a gift and something we must practise, from which a harvest is to be gathered. In so far as it is a gift, we cannot dispense with the giver, God. There is an abyss between yoga and Christian prayer. Christian prayer is an exercise of love; yoga may facilitate concentration and balance of mind – very useful elements in prayer- but it cannot guarantee love or conversion. Conversion opens up the way to this gift of prayer and it develops through love. This gift comes from the Holy Spirit and is not the fruit of human effort. Let us never forget that the Christian religion is not a commodity made by man, it is God who gives it to man. Man is not a Prometheus stealing fire from heaven; he is a creature who receives in Jesus Christ the kiss of love from the father and redemption through love. And prayer that can be likened to the kiss of life of the redemption, is a gift in the strictest sense of the word; it must be asked from God...

I have said that Christian prayer is something altogether different from yoga. The latter never rises above the level of a mental exercise. The former demands that we examine in the light of God and from the point of view of his love what is my true self and the self that the world knows, both of them, and all my ensuing conduct. This explains why prayer weighs so heavily on many people. There is nothing simple about this exercise. It is not a question of playing at soldiers – we have to be soldiers. It means living the truth of God in our lives. So Christian prayer is the same as filial prayer; it is the attitude of the child at rest in his father's arms....

Christian prayer should fill the heart with the feelings God has for men. An understanding of the foolishness of men, forgiveness of faults reiterated, kindly feeling even for enemies, and the best of attitudes towards everybody – these are the sentiments that ought

to fill the heart that prays, and refine not only one's relationships with God but one's relationships with men also.

(*Circ. A Talk on Prayer*, pp. 512...517)

### **Text 10: Like a hardened bachelor**

What point is there in talking about creative prayer in community if the presence of the community is not assured? It is easier for three Brothers in a community of three Brothers to have community prayer than for three Brothers out of a community of ten. Where are the other seven? Put yourself in the place of the three. They are in an awkward situation. The empty space has a physical impact on them because it is unjustifiable and should not exist. Not only is one deprived of the prayers of the absentees, but the driving power of the community machine is brought to a halt, the power that drives the community in search of its soul.

In our anti-colonial epoch we hear much talk of peoples "in search of their souls", "determined to find their souls and express their identity". Each one of our communities should also be striving to realise its identity, to discover and express its soul.

See what happens. One begins to be absent from the community prayers because it is more convenient to remain in one's room, because one went to bed late in order to watch a match on television and in the morning is sunk in sleep. So that is an end to community meetings, people don't come together any more at a fixed time or place. There is no further community collaboration. We have reached the level of the selfish husband who, after a brief honeymoon, reorganises his life as a hardened bachelor, is determined to satisfy his own wants and whims, to have his own way without reference to her to whom he once said, "I love you". Because at that time it suited him to say that. The day when he had to give proof of his love, he drew back. Many Brothers are poor husbands of their community. Little do they care of her lives, little do they care about the standards of her life.

(*A Talk on Prayer*, pp. 533-534)

**Text 11: Do not destroy unity.**

There are those who will say to you: “For me the psalms have no meaning, and prayer in common is not to my taste.” One should say to such a person: “My dear man, there are two types of meals served according to needs, the restaurant type and the hotel type. You can go to a restaurant and order what you like. Here we serve the hotel type of meal, which is the same for everybody; besides, we come here not only for food, but for fellowship – *convivere*, as Cicero would say who preferred the Latin term *convivium*, feasting in fellowship, to the Greek *symposium*, a drinking party. To be seated at the same table, eating the same dishes, sharing a feast, feast in the key sense the term has come to acquire of recent years.

Charity and common fare, there you have precisely community prayer. To introduce catering for individual tastes does not make sense and misses the whole point of community prayer. The golden rule is to know how to adapt oneself to the prayer that suits the community. To start saying: “I don’t like this, I don’t like that,” means the end of unity. Because of you, the prayer ceases to be an instrument leading to communion. (*A Talk on Prayer*, pp. 542-543)

There are calls from God, which may require a “yes” together with a personal sacrifice. It would seem that a “yes” to community prayer is a “yes” that must be said and practised by the community, whether it be a matter of “traditional prayer” or of spontaneous prayer. The community can, through the fault of some members, be resistant to the promptings of the Spirit. The easiest course would be to take a “laissez-faire” attitude by absenting oneself, or even by being present, but without taking any real part. Very well, but let it be clearly understood that in the former case we are dividing the community, and this is serious, and in the latter we are impeding or cooling the activity of the community. (*A Talk on Prayer, Appendix on Creativity in Community Prayer*, p. 578)

**Text 12: Religious life is lived at the level of generosity and magnanimity.**

It can be said: “Prayer is not an obligation, especially praying at fixed times each day. It is no sin if I fail to do this.” True enough. But the reasoning is faulty. In becoming a religious it is not the idea to remain at the level of what is strictly of obligation. I do not undertake to fulfil the bare minimum in order to avoid sin.

A truly consecrated person cannot stay at the level of what is obligatory. We must go to the level of the generous and the magnanimous. We must drink deeply of God’s word to nourish our faith and preserve a generous heart. In such a life meditation will not be meanly measured, rather, it will be generously sought.

If we keep measuring things in terms of sin - mortal or venial - we shall never really enter into the dynamics of the Christian life. There are things that God asks, not as an ideal moral way of life, but as a condition of intimacy with Him. It is a matter of knowing just to what extent we wish to love the life presented to us by God. (*Circ.: Meditation*, pp.293-294)

**Text 13: To acknowledge we sometimes need a spiritual replenishment**

When the life of faith and the demands of love are thwarted by excessive activity, a certain instinct calls for a spiritual respite. This is particularly true when the activity implies elements that are secular and tend to downgrade the spiritual aspects of our life.

My master of novices was a soldier in the Great War of 1917. He used to speak of life in the trenches where the soldiers stood in mud for hours on end. Soldiers’ moral values are not always high and their words and actions were often degrading. He told me how he read “The History of a Soul” of St Thérèse in order to live in a different atmosphere and to give his life of faith and love a boost that his ordinary environment could not give.

If you think of the secularising influences in our lives – films, the press and other media, contacts with the pupils in our schools where the moral and religious atmosphere is, to say the least, pluralist – I would think there was never such a need for a time to compensate for all this, so that we might live more at the level of faith....

I imagine that you share my anxiety that it is a matter of concern to know whether Brothers, communities and provinces live at a minimum level, a sufficient level or a high level of mental prayer. When a man's heart finds peace in the Spirit of God and is richly imbued with the Gospel by long periods of prayer, you can feel how he is changed from a human point of view, as an apostle, or as a member of the community. (Circ.: *Meditation*, pp.297, and 298.)

**Text 14: To choose the best moment, but honestly**

There must be stability, so that meditation is not left to whims, feeling or caprice. This is a rudimentary element of any spiritual life. St Francis de Sales does not hesitate to lay down as the basis of the spiritual life:

“We must be faithfully exact in all that is asked of us despite the difficulties and the dryness that it may please God to allow to come our way.”...

Anyone who does not have the capacity to be regularly faithful will not become a man of prayer...

Time, regular and adequate, is necessary, for it takes time for meditation to become a way of life. Let us stay with this point a little. The last General Chapter agreed that the Brothers “envisage a psychologically suitable time to fulfil this requirement” – of meditation. After a few years two strange things have shown up. Some have thought that it was the intention of the Chapter to put meditation into the area of private devotion – something one could take up if you felt like it, but not necessarily every day: each one is free to decide when and with what frequency. The other

point is that some superiors are confused: can they require their Brothers to make a daily meditation when perhaps the General Chapter did not impose this? How did this confusion come about?

It would be the height of folly to draw from that flexibility as to the choice of time a way of smothering the very life it is supposed to promote. We are not saying to our Brothers that they choose any time, e.g. putting the prayer at a time when one is exhausted and has no strength to pray. It is rather a question of putting it at a time when we can best profit from it. If this is the point of being free to choose, so much the better. Otherwise it is sheer stupidity. (Circ.: *Meditation*, pp. 304-306)

### **Text 15: Meditation, the language of christian life**

Brothers, let us start by saying this: prayer is the language of Christian life. While we do not spend our lives talking, language and dialogue are real aspects of our being, necessary for our life. In the same way, meditation is an element of our Christian lives. And our Christian lives are simply God's life communicated to us through Christ, the Word within the hypostatic union. And we, deeply made one in Christ by baptism, faith, grace and the Church, we make up the Church and we live a life... We may say God's life is within us and, and it is the Word who lives this life in us. We may say that the Spirit sustained the life of a man whom we call Jesus Christ, the human nature of Jesus. The Spirit united him with God's Word. This same Spirit, the Holy Spirit makes us live Christ's life, His true life, just as he makes us live our own life...

You are not corpses; you are living persons, endowed with a different life from the purely natural one. Well, this life acts, and thinks in you, and in your Christian lives. That Christ lives our lives is a reality, we are conscious of it, we can give an account of it....

In a strict sense, meditation is speaking to God thanks to faith, speaking in love and with love. The one who speaks to God without faith does not pray. The one who speaks to God without

love does not pray either. To pray is to talk to God in the universe of faith and with the power of love.... But, in a broader sense, to pray is to reflect on the world, on what I do, on what I am going to do to spread the Gospel...

We should not subscribe to the idea that that religion and meditation are the same thing. Meditation is one of the elements of religion, albeit an essential and indispensable one. And, just as there is no life in a human person without consciousness and dialogue, there is no Christian life at all without meditation. You may be sure of this.

Anyone who finds this dialogue blocked in life may be sure that although he may know a lot about theology, psychology and philosophy his faith life is not going well... The one who does not feel the need to converse with God, and worse, the one who feels ill at ease when it comes to speaking with God, shows that something is out of tune in his life: his Christian life is very weak and somehow it is blocked. (*Llamamiento à la renovación, Problemática de la oración*, pp. 7-9; October 1972)

**Text 16: Meditation is life, not knowledge.**

One who wants to increase his faith must pay the price: the price of believing in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead. And blessed be this price, this source of joy! And it is a credit to you that that you hope in spite of insecurity, that you hope against all hope... When you announce the risen Christ, you commit yourselves to him to the point that, even in the most critical choices you have to make, you would suffer anything rather than renounce Jesus Christ. You would be prepared to lose everything, even your own mother, but not Christ. It might be said, "Committing yourself to Jesus like that, isn't that a bit like putting total trust in a water diviner?" You say to yourself that, hypothetically, that may be the case; nevertheless wager against that being the case, not just with words or concepts, but with life itself. Although you have only one life, you gamble it on Jesus Christ. Powerful witness that is!

In a climate of prayer you hear a word that makes everything in your life clear through the light of the Gospel, in a way contrary to nature by which we see very patchily indeed. Then you can be sure that this is not the work of man. And so when the beatitudes sing in your hearts a song that defies ordinary logic, and when you are called to keep on giving of yourself even to the point of death, living in faith and living the Gospel fully, then you know that you are hearing God's voice. The condition for this is that your life must be immersed in the Gospel. When your life is like this, do not swerve from your path – it is God you are speaking to. (*Llamamiento a la renovación, Problemática de la oración*, p. 9-11, Oct. 1972)

## **16. Responsibility and creativity in prayer**

Prayer Life is a point in which the Chapter has wrought a remarkable transformation, since it called for a far greater responsibility and a constant community creativity in this matter. The aspect that most characterises this new approach is what we might call “theological” prayer, in that it lifts us out of the ritual practices of the exercises of piety; it makes these instead, an incentive and means of reaching familiarity with God.

A Brother's conscience cannot be at ease if he performs his exercises of prayer in a mechanical way throughout his whole life. Peace is his reward if he makes an effort to dialogue in a filial way and has come to the contemplation not of a platonic God, but the Father of Our Lord Saviour Christ, and of the whole reality that has as its centre, Christ Our Risen Lord.

It seems that the Chapter Document on the renewal of Prayer Life has four main leit-motifs:

- daily community contact with the Church in the Eucharistic mystery and the prayer of the Mystical Body;
- living contact with the presence of Jesus in the revealed Word, by way of personal contemplation;
- an alertness and vigilance in spiritual matters which gains in authenticity by going to God by way of human situations;

• rhythm, regularity and creativity: rhythm and regularity in order to build up, as Voillaume says, not a dichotomy between prayer and action, but a movement of diastole and systole in our hearts and minds; creativity, for Jesus taught us that his religion is one of truth and life, and that we must speak to the Father in spirit and in truth. *Vocal meditation of a Superior General*, pp.335-336)

### **Text 18: Basilio and the Eucharist**

Since Father Manuel Portillo often accompanied Basilio, the Eucharist could be celebrated at the best time of the day and sometimes in unusual surroundings. The priest recalls that once the two men had Mass on one of the Amazon tributaries, surrounded by nature; another day, it was in the plane. The priest said: “He never let any day pass without the Eucharist: it became the central part of each day.” Basilio quoted, Bonhöffer’s words, “The first hours of the day are for the Lord.” At retreat time or assemblies, the Eucharist was never a simple appendix. A few minutes of quiet were programmed to enable everyone to celebrate Mass with serenity and dignity. Certain communities did not have any chapel, for others the Eucharist was celebrated in a vast chapel in which the Brothers were scattered. Sometimes, there were no appropriate decorations, just some plastic flowers put in place at the beginning of the scholastic year and never changed. Brother Basilio urged the Brothers to provide a suitable place for community prayer, giving proper attention to the details. If a school could afford gymnastic halls, laboratories, and sports grounds, it could budget so as to have a proper chapel for the students and a suitable oratory for the Brothers worthy of liturgical celebrations and community prayer. He encouraged particular care for sacramental catechesis and the celebration of the Eucharist with the pupils so that they would have the opportunity to receive the sacraments.” (*El Estilo de una vida*, pp. 57-58)

## 19. An Interview

*“There is something that has not been mentioned so far, but I am sure that is something everyone wants to know: how does Brother Basilio pray?”*

You ask a difficult question, but it is an important one. When someone says that he prays, and that he prays a good deal, that is a bad sign. The great men of prayer are people who do not believe they pray! I am going to be very honest about this. I am a man whose resources are much exhausted, truly exhausted. In view of the way I use my time, which I have told you about, you will understand that I do not have long periods of time for prayer. Clearly my prayer is like that of every other Marist Brother. I preserve, as much as I can, the most favourable time for prayer, and I am able to make two retreats each year, which I do with delight. Here I do not include the retreats I give. If I can manage to make a fifteen day retreat rather than a six day one, I seize the opportunity eagerly.

But the life of a superior general, at least mine, has been very irregular as to the rhythm of my prayer because of the incessant journeys, changing conditions and backgrounds. For me prayer has always been a need, a thirst. When I was very young I was left with this mark by a spiritual director who was a great man of prayer. He convinced me not only of the importance of prayer, but also of the conditions for prayer. It was not Father Caffarel or Father Fournier who taught me this. I discovered this in the scholasticate and have been aware of it ever since. In any event, every person has deep down an enormous thirst for prayer, for meditation, for God. “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts will never be at peace until they rest in you” (St Augustine). When Miguel de Unamuno or Ortega y Gasset uttered their blasphemous prayers, they were indirectly expressing their need for prayer. Every person has this need deep down. I have this need, that is undeniable.

The Brothers have been a great help to me in my prayer. First the community of the General Council, and then, when you give as many as eight or ten or even fifteen retreats on prayer each year,

you are drawn into a particular atmosphere: liturgies and prayers that are prepared and carried out exceptionally well. Listening to the confidences of certain confreres brings you face to face with the richness of the interior life. Have a look at the circular of Fidelity. Some Brothers live continually in the presence of God. I don't think that continual prayer is a possibility, that prayer can become part of the subconscious. All of these men have such a humble idea of themselves!

And then, you have him, over there... (Brother Basilio pointed to a niche where there was a portrait and a relic of Marcellin Champagnat.) How many times during an interview with a Brother I have been struck by a strong message while I was speaking with him. It is because of my Brothers that my prayer is interwoven with my life.

And then, the experience of powerlessness: how often have I listened to a Brother who shares a problem that I have no answer to. At that time my prayer is addressed to the Holy Spirit or to Marcellin Champagnat. I listen... and then out come words that are spontaneous. All of this brings you to humility, because you know that you do not have the solution: that comes from elsewhere. (*Présence Mariste*, No. 163, June 1985.)

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