

## Advent 2. 07

1. We spoke last week about prayer as the raising of the mind and heart to God. We also said that many people who have no religious affiliation nevertheless pray, and we said that the fact that they do so is a kind of proof of what Karl Rahner said, that we can think and be self-conscious only because God is already and always present to us as the backdrop of our consciousness. Thus prayer is our becoming aware of the one who is already there. God is, as St. Paul tells us in the Acts of the Apostles (17:28), the one in whom “we live and move and have our being.” This phrase, Paul tells us, is not his own. He is speaking to the Athenians and he is quoting their own poets. Thus prayer is natural to us as people, as human beings. Even non-believers in a crisis situation may find themselves spontaneously praying for help. They have to remind themselves that they don’t believe there is anyone there to listen to them, that they are simply talking to themselves, and should stop doing that. But believers can keep talking to the one in whom they live and move and have their being.

2. But that is as far as prayer goes for millions of people. They pray as individuals, but they never graduate to praying with others. This is a very pronounced phenomenon in our current Western

world. So many of our contemporaries who consider themselves believers tell us that they do pray but they don't want to have anything to do with organized religion. They define themselves as spiritual but not as religious people because they understand the term religious to mean membership in a particular church or mosque or synagogue, and they don't want that. And they have many reasons for defending their position. For example, they point out that organized religion is often corrupt. Look at the priest scandal in the Catholic Church. Look at the money scandals in the evangelical churches. Look at the hatred and war which extreme Islamists embrace. Look at the hypocrisy religion engenders because it has certain rules which all its members are supposed to observe and yet many don't. Look at the bigotry it encourages because it teaches people that their religion is the only correct one. Organized religion also infringes on people's individual's spiritual freedom because it tells them how to believe and how to live. Given all these evil expressions of organized religion, these spiritual people are content with their individual way of faith, and in doing that they represent, perhaps unconsciously the American spirit of rugged individualism, which is in turn an expression of the individualism of contemporary Western civilization as a whole.

3. It is not easy to reject their arguments. Organized religion can and indeed does all the things they mentioned. It can be, and indeed, has been corrupt. It can and indeed has produced hatred and war. It can and indeed has produced hypocrisy and bigotry. It can and indeed has infringed upon the individual's freedom. What can we say? How can we defend the existence of organized religion? There are two major arguments, it seems to me. The first is based on ordinary experience; the second is based on faith. The first is based on the fact that no person is all alone. "No man is an island" is the famous phrase from the poet John Donne. No, we are all part of the main. We come from others, our parents, and we live of necessity with others. We cannot live entirely alone. If we did, we would cease to be human, for we would never learn to speak a language, and without language we would become little more than an intelligent animal enclosed upon itself. Just as we create government in order to deal with our individual human needs, so we have to create a common expression of our personal faith, and that is organized religion. People who deny the need for organized religion are likely to deny as well the need for government and everything else that goes beyond their individual lives and interests. They are anti-social. They do not help the world. They are enclosed upon themselves, and that is ultimately inhuman. Organized religion is the natural expression of our humanity, of the

fact that we are all in this together, are all members of the same human race and must live accordingly. And that is why wherever there are people, there is organized religion.

4. But the second argument in defense of organized religion is not based directly on our shared common humanity, but on the different religions themselves and their understanding of God. And with the two religions most familiar to us, Judaism and Christianity, their understanding of God is that he works not simply with individuals but with groups. The God of the Jews intervened in history to create a people, the Jews, and Jesus, a Jew, believed in this kind of God and acted in a similar way. He dealt with the crowds. He chose individuals, but he molded them into a community. Therefore, we have to say that the God of Judaism and Christianity is a God who wants to make a splash in history, and to do so he creates communities of people. There is no way that this God is going to be content to work simply with the individual's spirituality. No, he is a God of history, a God of the nations, and he plans to bring this entire world history to himself. He is building a kingdom for himself. Those who believe in this kind of God have to be members of a synagogue or church. Not to be a member is to deny this God's reality.

5. We all have siblings or children or relatives or friends who define themselves as spiritual but not religious because they don't believe in organized religion. I don't know if the reasons I have given here will help you with them. Perhaps the first, that we are social by nature, may be acceptable to them. But the second, that God is a God of history and deals with us as people and not simply as individuals, may not. But if it doesn't and they still want to claim that they are Christians, you might have to break the bad news to them that they are misinterpreting Jesus and his message. He created a community; he founded a church, and he sent his disciples out to preach to the world. They cannot claim to be Christians and refuse to join a church. However, I hope that these arguments may bolster our own commitment as religious people and help us to become better preachers of the Gospel. And I hope that they will teach us that we must pray not simply as individuals but also as a community, as a church. Let me talk about our communal prayer next week.