



## Summer Books

A special supplement concentrates on fiction, on authors and how they create.

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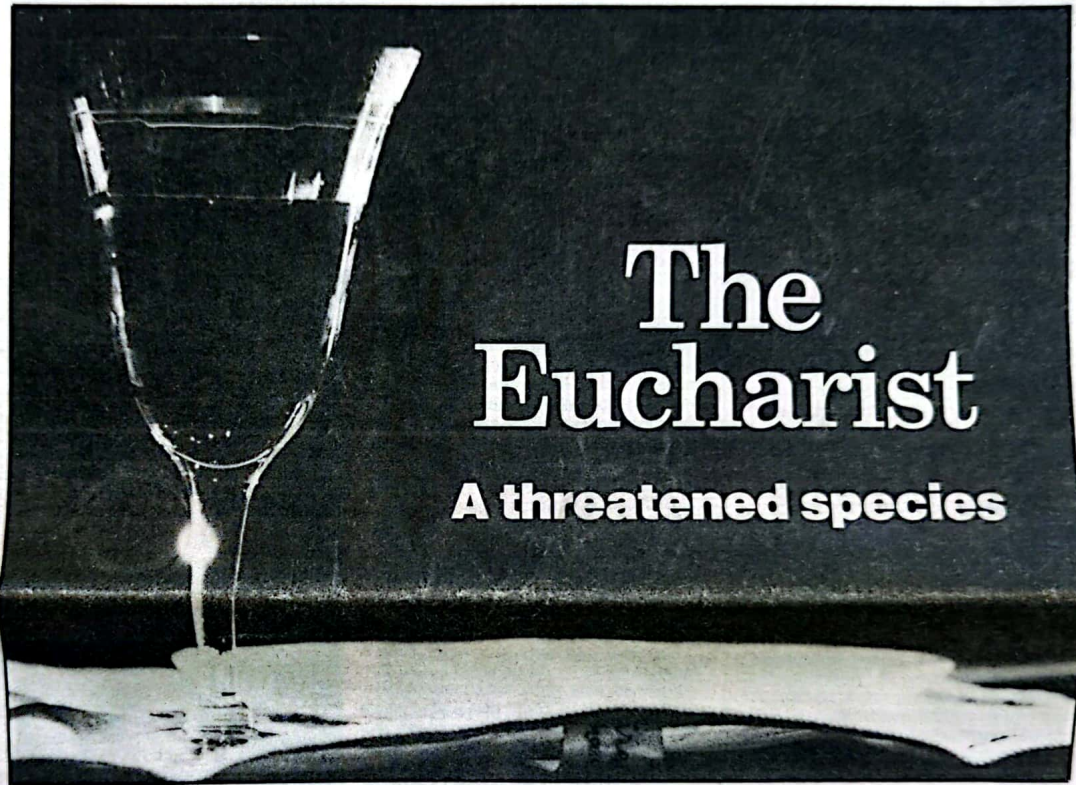
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# The Eucharist

## A threatened species

### 'Loss takes the heart from salvation process'

"Priest shortage may signal end of Eucharist at center of parish," said the headline of a special report of the National Catholic Reporter written by Jim Castelli (April 13). The front-page article brought to center stage one of the most troubling problems Catholics face today, a problem growing in the United States and sadly long experienced in other parts of the world.

In an editorial in the same issue, we called for a widespread discussion of the phenomenon. Readers' letters have poured in and some have already been published (May 4). This week, responding to the request, theologian Bernard J. Cooke, College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, MA, begins a three-part series on this eucharistic crisis. Cooke specializes in sacramental theology. —the editors

By BERNARD J. COOKE

A serious threat faces Catholicism. Just when the emergence of a vibrant liturgical movement, Vatican II's decree on the liturgy and an unprecedented development of sacramental theology have given promise of a new golden age of Christian celebration of Eucharist, we are faced with the prospect of most

Catholics celebrating Eucharist infrequently, if at all. Having discovered what the Mass could and should be, it seems now that it may be taken away from most of us.

It is not just a question of Catholics being unable to attend Mass and obtain the graces it brings. After all, the communion services that now replace Mass in many places do still honor the age-old be-

lieving that Christians nourish their life of faith by feeding on the "bread of life."

lied that Christians nourish their life of faith by feeding on the "bread of life."

The danger is that the faith life of Catholics will atrophy from inactivity, for Christians are not meant to "attend" the Eucharist; they are meant to do it.

Catholics become Christian by being Christian, above all by performing the most basic Christian action: celebrating the death and resurrection of Christ in Eucharist. Catholics can become mature believers only by believing, by professing their faith in the risen Lord who becomes

increasingly present in their midst as they gather to commemorate and share in the mystery of his Passover into glory. We have become so accustomed to the notion that the ordained celebrant and he alone is the agent of the Mass that we have forgotten that it is the community gathered as body of Christ which enables the risen Lord to be present as the principal agent.

Faith and grace are life; they must develop as all life does by appropriate activity. Life cannot simply be given people; they must live. From the very beginning of Christianity and for many centuries, the ritual actions we call the sacraments were seen primarily as actions of the community, as professions of faith. Today, however, with diminishing opportunities for Eucharist, many Catholics are deprived of the foremost situation in which they are to profess their faith. Stunting of

See Eucharist, page 10



# Meditation: Is East least and West best?

The Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, under the direction of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, on Dec. 14, 1989, promulgated a "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Meditation" (NCR, Dec. 29).

While granting that Eastern prayer and meditation methods have positive elements, the document, which was approved by Pope John Paul II, went on to stress the "dangers and errors" inherent in the Oriental approach.

Below, we publish excerpts from the letter. This is followed by a reaction to the document by Benedictine Father Bede Griffiths, who has lectured and written widely on "the marriage of East and West." Griffiths went to India in 1955 and cofounded the Kurisumela Ashram and has lived at Saccindananda Ashram, Shantivanam, since 1968. And finally, a response from Benedictine Sister Pascale Coff, prioress of Forest of Peace Ashram, near Tulsa, OK.

## Dangers of fusing Christian prayer with Eastern ways

Many Christians today have a keen desire to learn how to experience a deeper and authentic prayer life despite the not inconsiderable difficulties which modern culture places in the way of the need for silence, recollection and meditation. The interest which in recent years has been awakened also among some Christians by forms of meditation associated with some Eastern religions and their particular methods of prayer is a significant sign of this need for spiritual recollection and a deep contact with the divine mystery.

Nevertheless, faced with this phenomenon, many feel the need for sure criteria of a doctrinal and pastoral character which might allow them to instruct others in prayer, in its numerous manifestations, while remaining faithful to the truth revealed in Jesus, by means of the genuine tradition of the church. This present letter seeks to reply to this urgent need, so that in the various particular churches, the many different forms of prayer, including new ones, may never lose their correct personal and communitarian nature. . . .

Above all, the question concerns Eastern methods. Some people today turn to these methods for therapeutic reasons. The spiritual restlessness arising from a life subjected to the driving pace of a technologically advanced society also brings a certain number of Christians to seek in these methods of prayer a path to interior peace and a psychic balance. This psychological aspect is not dealt with in the present letter, which instead emphasizes the theological and spiritual implications of the question.

Other Christians, caught up in the movement toward openness and exchanges between various religions and cultures, are of the opinion that their prayer has much to gain from these methods. Observing that in recent times many traditional methods of meditation, especially Christian ones, have fallen into disuse, they wonder whether it might not now be possible, by a new training in prayer, to enrich our heritage by incorporating what has until now been foreign to it.



Pope Paul VI met with Buddhist prelates in Sri Lanka during his 1970 trip to the Far East.

To answer this question, one must first of all consider, even if only in a general way, in what does the intimate nature of Christian prayer consist. . . .

It is defined, properly speaking, as a personal, intimate and profound dialogue between man and God. It expresses therefore the communion of redeemed creatures with the intimate life of the Persons of the Trinity. This communion, based on baptism and the Eucharist, source and summit of the life of the church, implies an attitude of conversion,

giving everything proceeds to converge on Christ, the fullness of revelation and of grace, and on the gift of the Holy Spirit. . . .

The prayer of Jesus has been entrusted to the church ("Pray then like this" — Luke 11:2). This is why, when a Christian prays, even if he is alone, his prayer is in fact always within the framework of the "Communion of Saints" in which and with which he prays, whether in a public and liturgical way or in a private manner.

Consequently, it must always be offered within the authentic spirit of the church

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a flight from "self" to the "You" of God.

Thus Christian prayer is at the same time always authentically personal and communitarian. It flees from impersonal techniques or from concentrating on oneself, which can create a kind of rut, imprisoning the person praying in a spiritual privatism which is incapable of a free openness to the transcendental God. . . .

There exists. . . a strict relationship between revelation and prayer. The dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* teaches that by means of his revelation the invisible God "from the fullness of his love, addresses men as his friends (cf. Exodus 33:11; John 15:14-15), and moves among them (cf. Baruch 3:38), in order to invite and receive them into his own company." This revelation takes place through words and actions which have a constant mutual reference, one to the other; from the very be-

at prayer, and therefore under its guidance, which can sometimes take a concrete form in terms of a proven spiritual direction. The Christian, even when he is alone and prays in secret, is conscious that he always prays for the good of the church in union with Christ, in the Holy Spirit and together with all the saints.

Even in the first centuries of the church some incorrect forms of prayer crept in. Some New Testament texts (cf. 1 John 4:3; 1 Timothy 1:3-7 and 4:3-4) already give hints of their existence. Subsequently, two fundamental deviations came to be identified: Pseudognosticism and Messalianism, both of concern to the fathers of the church. . . .

Both of these forms of error continue to be a temptation for man the sinner. They incite him to try and overcome the distance separating creature from Creator,

as though there ought not to be such a distance; to consider the way of Christ on earth, by which he wishes to lead us to the Father, as something now surpassed; to bring down to the level of natural psychology what has been regarded as pure grace, considering it instead as "superior knowledge" or as "experience."

Such erroneous forms, having reappeared in history from time to time on the fringes of the church's prayer, seem once more to impress many Christians, appealing to them as a kind of remedy, be it psychological or spiritual, or as a quick way of finding God.

However, these forms of error, wherever they arise, can be diagnosed very simply. The meditation of the Christian in prayer seeks to grasp the depths of the divine in the salvific works of God in Christ, the Incarnate Word, and in the gift of his Spirit. These divine depths are always revealed to him through the human-earthly dimension. Similar methods of meditation, on the other hand, including those which have their starting-point in the words and deeds of Jesus, try as far as possible to put aside everything that is worldly, sense-perceptible or conceptually limited. It is thus an attempt to ascend to or immerse oneself in the sphere of the divine, which as such is neither terrestrial, sense-perceptible nor capable of conceptualization. . . .

With the present diffusion of Eastern methods of meditation in the Christian world and in ecclesial communities, we find ourselves faced with a pointed renewal of an attempt, which is not free from dangers and errors, to fuse Christian meditation with that which is non-

Continued on page 12



## Letter

Continued from page 11  
*Christian*. Proposals in this direction are numerous and radical to a greater or lesser extent.

Some use Eastern methods solely as a psychophysical preparation for a truly Christian contemplation; others go further and, using different techniques, try to generate spiritual experiences similar to those described in the writings of certain Catholic mystics. Still others do not hesitate to place that absolute without image or concepts, which is proper to Buddhist theory, on the same level as the majesty of God revealed in Christ, which towers above finite reality.

To this end, they make use of a "negative theology," which transcends every affirmation seeking to express what God is and denies that the things of this world can offer traces of the infinity of God. Thus, they propose abandoning not only meditation on the salvific works accomplished in history by the God of the Old and New Covenant, but also the very idea of the one and true God, who is love, in favor of an immersion "in the indeterminate abyss of the divinity."

These and similar proposals to harmonize Christian meditation with Eastern techniques need to have their contents and methods ever subjected to a thoroughgoing examination so as to avoid the danger of falling into syncretism. ■

## Vatican letter disguises wisdom of East religions

By BEDE GRIFFITHS, OSB

As a response to the challenge presented by Hindu and Buddhist spirituality today, I find the document on Christian prayer and meditation extremely disappointing.

There is no hint of the tremendous depth of this spirituality or of its profound wisdom. Eastern meditation is treated as if it were a matter of superficial techniques, of "bits and pieces" a Christian can use if he wishes, but of whose dangers and abuses he must be made aware. What is still more disappointing is that the conception of Christian prayer it presents is most inadequate, ignoring as it does what is deepest and most significant in the gospel and in Catholic tradition.

The document insists on the "distance" that must always exist between man and God as creature and creator and warns against any attempt to "try and overcome the distance," as if God in Christ had not already overcome that distance and united us with him in the closest bonds. St. Paul says, "You who were far off, he has brought near — not kept distant — in the blood of Christ."

Jesus himself totally denies any such distance. "I am the vine," he says, "you are the branches." How can the branches be "distant" from the vine?

Later, the document insists that we must "never in any way seek to place ourselves on the same level as the object of our contemplation." Of course, we don't seek to place ourselves on the same level. It is God who has already placed us there. Jesus says, "I have not called you servants, but friends." And to show what such friendship means, he prays for his

disciples, "that they may be one, as thou, Father in me and I in thee, that they may be one in us."

The union between Jesus and the Father in the mystery of the Trinity is the closest it is possible to conceive, or rather it is beyond all conception. Yet, it is for this very union that Jesus prays for his disciples.

One of the great teachers of Christian meditation today, Father John Main, has said that Christian meditation is a "participation in the consciousness of Christ. Or rather it is to share in that stream of

**There is a crisis in the church today. Many Christians are looking to the church for guidance in contemplative prayer and failing to find it.**

love which flows between Jesus and the Father and is the Holy Spirit."

It is to this depth of contemplative wisdom that Christian meditation should lead us, and it is toward this depth of unitive prayer that many Christians have found that the Hindu and Buddhist and Sufi mystics can lead us.

This reminds us that, centuries ago, the church was challenged by a similar movement of mystical prayer in the fourth century Platonism of Plotinus and Porphyry. But the church in the fourth century did not meet this challenge by a cautious retreat into the past. It boldly accepted the challenge and incorporated into Christian doctrine the profound insights of the Neoplatonists. Jean Danielou in his *Platonisme et Theologie Mystique* has shown how St. Gregory of Nyssa steeped himself in the philosophy of Plotinus and by subtle changes adapted it to orthodox Christian doctrine.

Another crisis in Christian mysticism was encountered in the sixth century with Dionysius the Areopagite, now generally thought to have been a Syrian monk of that period who had absorbed the teaching of Porphyry, a later fifth-century Platonist. He boldly went beyond this dualistic, conceptual model of prayer to which the Roman document clings and declared that in contemplative prayer we must go beyond all words and concepts and enter into "divine darkness" so that we come to "know by unknowing."

Anyone familiar with Hindu and Buddhist mysticism will know that it is to this "supraconceptual" knowledge, this experience of a transcendent mystery, transcending word and thought, that they also can lead.

This is not to say that Hindu, Buddhist and Christian mystics all have the same experience. But it is to recognize an analogy between them and to look upon the Hindu and Buddhist experience as something of supreme significance, not to be lightly dismissed by a Christian as of no importance.

There is a crisis in the church today. Many Christians are looking to the church for guidance in contemplative prayer and failing to find it. They then turn to Hindu and Buddhist masters for guidance and often through them come to understand something of the depth of Christian mysticism.

But for such people, this document offers no assistance whatever. It is, rather, calculated to put them off and make them confirmed in their belief that the Christian church has nothing to offer those who are seeking God in the dark, often on a lonely path and desperately in need of the guidance the church so often fails to give. ■

## Putting distance between us and God is not God's idea

By PASCALINE COFF, OSB

The purpose of the internal church document is primarily to give bishops support in their pastoral solicitude for the churches entrusted to them, especially in the area of teaching Christian prayer. Therefore, the letter sets out to give sure criteria of both doctrinal and pastoral character that will allow bishops "to instruct others in prayer, in its numerous manifestations, while remaining faithful to the truth revealed in Jesus, by means of the genuine tradition of the church."

One regrets that the outline set forth of the church's genuine prayer tradition stops short of the riches of her mystics and likewise those of the Eastern religions. While the letter states clearly that Eastern approaches to prayer should not be rejected out of hand, it gives no hint of the great depth and profound wisdom of this spirituality.

John Borelli, director of interreligious relations of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, said the letter contains "an implicit recognition of the importance of studying the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, to name two, so that there will be no misunderstandings of what these traditions teach regarding meditation."

The warning against the use or overuse of some Eastern prayer "techniques," while necessary, could equally include some of the Christian methods, for example, the Jesus Prayer and breath control as outlined in the *Philokalia*. If overdone, this, too, could lead to brain damage.

Trappist Father Thomas Keating, chairman of the North American Board for East-West Dialogue and wisdom teacher for the Christian spiritual tradition at Harmonia Mundi, said in October 1989 that many of the Vatican's cautions were well-taken.

"In my experiences of talking with Eastern spiritual masters," he said, "they are just as cautious as this document is" about mistaking psychological states that can be induced by meditation "for some great enlightenment."

On the last lap of his journey in this life, the monk Thomas Merton set out with an icon of his breviary on the back of which he copied in his own hand a passage from the *Philokalia*:

If we wish to please the true God and to be friends with the most blessed of friendships, let us present our spirit naked to God. Let us not draw into it anything of this present world — no art, no thought, no reasoning, no self-justification — even though we should possess all the wisdom of this world.

Merton's fascination with the "naked knowledge" of the God who is love, a tradition that goes back to Evagrius, would have come up short at the Vatican letter's insistence that we must never in any way seek to place ourselves on the same level as the object of our contemplation. An octogenarian Christian monk in India, reflecting on this teaching in the document, says: "Of course we don't seek to place ourselves on the same level. It is God who has already placed us there."

As the Holy Easter season prolongs the graces of Christ's Passover, who can be unmindful of the great gift of friendship given the apostles and all of us at the Last Supper when Jesus said, "I no longer call you servants, but friends," and the joy of his priestly prayer still rejoices our hearts: "That they may be one, as thou Father in me, and I in them, that they may be one in us."

The document is a good beginning but far from a complete treatise on Eastern and Western prayer. ■



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