

Prayer Attitudes in the Communion of Saints

Lois Miles

Have you ever wondered if your prayers had any worth or value? Or how they compare with those of the saints? Adrienne von Speyr looks at the prayer attitudes of some in the Communion of Saints. She includes priests, nuns, monks—even one Luther, a former monk!—popes, artists, musicians, Church Fathers and Apostles. Not all are canonized. Many are relatively unknown. But these vignettes of hundreds of Christians give insight into the enormous variety of prayer lives and attitudes practiced over the last two millennia.

Von Balthasar's valuable introduction to von Speyr is enough to recommend this book and to encourage further exploration in her life and writings. She was not a plaster saint or a cloistered nun. She was a physician. Her father died when she was young. Shortly thereafter, she was diagnosed with terminal tuberculosis. After three years, she returned to finish her schooling in another city and an unfamiliar language. She financed medical school by tutoring younger girls. She married a widower with two small sons—only to be widowed herself. Yet, von Speyr was a cheerful, vibrant person who loved people and was genuinely interested in what they were doing. When she became an invalid, people came to her home where they waited in a room filled with food and drink until they could spend a few minutes with her.¹

From her earliest years, von Speyr's life was filled with love for the poor and a continual striving to know God. She lived in the world without becoming of the world. As a general physician, she chose to serve the poor and needy, often without pay. The visions and interactions with Mary and the Saints were not a separate part of her life but were integrated with her care for her family, her patients and 'her daughters' in the Community she cofounded with von Balthasar. Her self-imposed penances for others were so severe that von Balthasar had to restrain her enthusiasm. She prayed without ceasing, often whole nights of prayer on a cold floor. "If she herself had not prayed so much, she would not have been able to transmit any prayers, and if she did not herself have some experience of everything that appears in all these prayers, she would also not have been able to reproduce them."² However, until she died no one—not even her family—knew of her mysticism or stigmata, except von Balthasar.

This is a book to dip into for devotional and contemplative reading—as are all of von Speyr's writings. These are not saccharine saints presented for our 'edification'. They are transparent human beings who in an open confession have presented their lives to us. Some presentations encourage us, some stimulate, some prod, some dismay. Is my prayer like his: a disorganized rubbish heap? Or like another's: so intellectual that God is almost forgotten? Or like hers: all words and no listening? Or like the ones whose prayer and work are so integrated that love of God permeates every aspect of their life? Each vignette requires us to look at our own prayer attitudes in order to discover if this would be our confession in the Great Congregation. Von Speyr does not judge these prayers; she 'measures' them by the self-giving love of God. And it is this love that gives us hope to pray better—to pray with and as the saints.

¹ Conversation with John, Paul and Theodore von Speyr, 29 February 2008.

² Von Balthasar, "General Introduction to the Posthumous Works" in *Book of All Saints*, Part I, Adrienne von Speyr, trans. D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 23.

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