

## Aspiratory Prayer, a Welcome Addition to Contemplative Prayer

Aspirations (aspiratory prayer) were a treasure in European Christianity in the late Middle Ages and one of the great legacies of the Touraine Reform in 17th-century France. This reform took place in "les Grands Carmes," the popular name in France for the Carmelites of the Ancient Observance (OCarm). The style of prayer that goes by the name of aspirative or aspiratory prayer, or simply aspiration, is almost unknown in contemporary spirituality. The present article is a move to fill this lacuna and to suggest how the prayer of aspirations can contribute to the contemplative renewal of our times. I will first give an overview of the prayer in tradition and highlight its three outstanding proponents: the 13th-century Carthusian Hugh of Balma, the Franciscan Henry Herp (+ 1477), and the Carmelite John of St. Samson (1571-1636). Finally I shall make some suggestions on how to revive the practice.

### What Is Aspiratory Prayer?

Aspiratory prayer is a warm, human approach to God that is inexorably affective. It proceeds by way of fervent desires of the heart. It was considered a shortcut, a direct route, to intimacy and oneness with God. Its structure is simple: frequent and intense desires breathed out to God. It has only one goal, union with God, so it ceases to have a role when mystical union is achieved.

Aspirations are not the same as ejaculations, though they are like each other. Ejaculatory prayer describes any and all brief prayers sent like darts to heaven for help, thanksgiving, adoration, or any other good motive. "My Jesus, mercy" is an ejaculation. Aspirations are only and always passionate desires or fervent acts of love of God. They are expressed in words or sighs or silence. "My God, I love you" is an aspiration. To aspire means to breathe out, with the

connotation of breathing hard after something. In aspiratory prayer one breathes out heartfelt desires for God. It is yearning for God, like gasping for God.

Aspiratory prayer is simple and focused, though in the beginning it may cover a wide sweep of emotions and feelings. Practice simplifies and unifies the faculties to give them a single thrust, much as the prayer of simplicity consolidates the multiple affections of affective prayer into a single attitude of loving presence. Aspiratory prayer sets the heart on one goal, divine union, and is a positive step in that direction. Not everybody can use it. It is not for beginners, but for those who have come to know God and themselves through Bible reading, reflection, and loving conversations with God. When a person has put her house in order and has come to love God in truth, she is ready for this prayer. For those who love God, it will become as natural as breathing.

Catholic teachers in the past were sticklers in assigning different prayer forms to different stages of growth. The prayer of beginners was discursive meditation and affective prayer, that is, first much thinking and then many affections. The next stage was contemplative, and it featured forms like simply looking at the tabernacle as in the Cure d'Ars' "I look at him and he looks at me," or today's resting in God in centering prayer, or saying the mantra as in Christian Meditation. Today we probably pay less attention to the degrees of prayer, though we still honor them. Centering prayer and Christian Meditation have democratized contemplative prayer. Certainly some knowledge and love of the Lord is presupposed for contemplative prayer, but a little knowledge and love go a long way. Those who are comfortable with centering prayer and Christian Meditation will be at home with aspirations.

Who, then, are called to this prayer? Those who are fervent and serious about their relationship with God and have a great desire for intimacy with God. They are looking for the "more." The classical teaching placed the prayer in the illuminative way as part of the contemplative life. Two categories are involved here, and both are second stages: the illuminative comes between the purgative and the unitive way, and the contemplative life between the active and the mystical life. The three divisions correspond to beginners, the proficient, and the perfect. Active life has to do with external behavior, contemplative with inner prayer, and the mystical life with high sanctity. The purgative way is concerned with conversion and purification, the illuminative way with enlightenment, and the unitive with union with God.

The three ways and their content are criticized today for being too dependent on Neoplatonic philosophy, the system that canonized the immaterial and denigrated the bodily.<sup>1</sup> Aspirative prayer rises above this controversy and in fact is a corrective against exaggerated spiritualism and minimizing the physical and bodily in the spiritual life. Aspirations welcome and embrace the emotional and the sensible; these human qualities lead to the highest realms of the spirit. They move the experience of God away from the intellectual and into the realm of affection and love.<sup>2</sup>

Aspiratory prayer comes out of the same tradition as centering prayer and Christian Meditation. The latter two are contemporary constructions from that contemplative tradition, a development that aspiratory prayer has yet to find. But all three systems appeal to the same sources, the same authors, and even the same texts for their grounding and justification.<sup>3</sup> This fact and their constant location in the middle stage of

spiritual development argue to their commonality.

Centering prayer and Christian Meditation seek silent presence and quiet resting in God. At the same time they are active prayer, rightly called meditation of a nondiscursive or contemplative type. They are not classical contemplation in the sense of infused prayer, but are products of human effort and ordinary grace. Aspiratory prayer is obviously active in the same sense. It uses the language of intense, passionate love and expresses the yearning of the heart and delights to rest in the Lord.

Aspiratory prayer is more than loving conversation with God. It expresses a strong act of the will that desires to experience God. So it is more than a tête-à-tête, even in the loving language of affective colloquy. The difference is intensity. Affective prayer engages the feelings but in a diffuse way, whereas a strong will and urgent longings for intimacy dominate aspiratory prayer.

Aspirations fit nicely into the perspectives and practice of "love mysticism," which is a form of relating to God in spousal love. The language of spousal love is very human, amorous, and passionate. Its biblical source is the Song of Songs or St. John's Gospel, and it is a frequent feature in medieval women mystics and also in writers like St. Bernard or St. John of the Cross. Janet K. Ruffing has written a guide for the spiritual direction of those called to this way. She gives many examples of its language, one of which is the following conversation in Mechthild of Magdeburg, who says to God: "God, you are my lover, / my longing, / my flowing stream, / my sun, / and I am your reflection." And God replies: "It is my nature that makes me love you often, / for I am love itself. / It is my longing that makes me love you intensely, / for I yearn to be loved from the heart. / It is

my eternity that makes me love you long, / for I have no end."<sup>4</sup>

Aspirative prayer is not limited to spousal love. It is at home with a nonspousal love of God, which Janet Ruffing calls simply apophatic. The mysticism of the more matter-of-fact *Cloud of Unknowing* features whole-hearted love, often without obvious passion. In this latter case the love is sublimated into disinterested love in a style of relationship that is reserved and controlled. Mystics in this pattern will practice their own brand of aspirations.

Aspiratory prayer is thus a technical term, but it is not "one size fits all." Its normal form is sensible-spiritual love. For Henry Herp only this love qualifies as aspiration. For him its follow-up, which is pure spiritual love, is not aspiration, but unitive love. John of St. Samson, however, treats pure spiritual love as a form of aspiration, and for him this higher aspiration leads one into the furnace of God's love in transforming union. For both authors the will is the driving force for aspirations and for unitive love. In sensible-spiritual love the sensibility is the carrier, but the momentum comes from the will, which makes the love truly spiritual.

Do not think that the practitioner lives on a perpetual high. The expression of loving desires for God continues in down days and dryness as much as in times of sweetness and sensible consolation. The feeling element is still there. It must be genuine, not faked or pretended or forced. Thérèse of Lisieux is a perfect example of the expression of passionate desires of love for God in the darkest moments of life.<sup>5</sup>

There are degrees of the practice corresponding to the person's habitual love of God and the grace of the moment. John of St. Samson sees it as leading directly into a mystical expression, in which the Holy Spirit breathes out enflamed desires for God. His

conditions for practicing this prayer are demanding. Persons who take up the practice must be mortified, humble, and self-effacing as well as robust in health. In his view aspirations go beyond the enthusiasm of a newly baptized Pentecostal or charismatic and belong to persons advanced in the love of God and on fire for the summit.

## **The History and Theology of Aspiratory Prayer**

Aspiratory prayer flourished in the late Middle Ages in northern Europe, especially the Rhineland and France, from the 13th to the 17th century. At the time of the Touraine Reform, the practice was common in popular religious culture. Aspirative prayer appealed to the architects of Touraine because they saw the practice as dovetailing with their view of the goal of the Carmelite order, which was to live continuously in the loving presence of God.<sup>6</sup>

Intimations of aspiratory prayer are found in the New Testament, in St. Augustine and John Cassian, who were contemporaries, in St. Benedict and Guigo II, and in other early authors. The first to give aspirative prayer a central place in the spiritual life was Hugh of Balma, whose *Theologia Mystica* exerted wide influence, partly because it was thought to be the work of St. Bonaventure. Hugh of Balma taught the way of the heart, and aspiratory prayer was its chief expression. First one must know one's weak self and the goodness of God, since anyone filled with self is unable to yearn for God. This knowledge prepares one to rise up to God in "anagogic contemplation."

Anagogic contemplation means moving from creature to Creator, from the text of Scripture to the living God, enflamed with desire and love. Such is aspiratory prayer. The love is both natural-spiritual and purely spir-

itual, and God is the direct object. The love increases with the simplification and unification of the faculties until ultimately there is mystical union with the Trinity in the high point of the soul called the *apex mentis*. Henry Herp and John of St. Samson will pick up on these perspectives and expand them with the help of Jan van Ruusbroec's theology (1293 -1381).

Hugh had many imitators, especially among the Carthusians, who promoted and developed this teaching so effectively that Everard Mercurian, an early general of the Jesuits, warned the Society about "the Carthusian method of prayer" for fear that its popularity would marginalize Ignatian prayer in Spain.<sup>7</sup> The 14th-century anonymous English text *The Cloud of Unknowing* is likely a Carthusian document, both because it can easily be interpreted as a full exposition of aspiratory prayer and because its anonymous author may well be a Carthusian.<sup>8</sup> A number of familiar quotations from the book are obviously formulas of aspiratory prayer.

### **Henry Herp OFM (+1447)**

Henry Herp wrote the first synthesis of the whole spiritual journey around the topic of aspirative prayer. His map is the structure of the soul as delineated by the great Flemish mystical writer Jan van Ruusbroec. The soul is three concentric circles, each of them representing a different level of human activity. Herp offers a detailed plan for moving through the outer two levels and arriving at the inner circle of highest union with the Holy Trinity. He lays down instructions for each of the phases of the journey, but his chief contribution is to show how aspirative prayer moves one through the middle circle.

Ruusbroec calls the three circles "spheres" or "unities," whereas Herp names

them mansions or dwelling places like Teresa of Avila. The first is the region of the senses, the second that of the spirit, and the third the "fond" or ground, the dwelling place of the Holy Trinity.

One must traverse each level to get to the center, and the way is introversion, a concept that goes back to St. Augustine. Herp calls it "ascension." Persons "ascend," that is, they are lifted up by a sweeping action that carries them through the given circle and toward the center; the searcher for God leaves behind the lesser level or part of it in favor of the higher one. This process of introversion means making the powers on each level converge toward the center. The activity of each level is collapsed into the next step. In this imagery the outer circle of exterior behavior is introverted into the middle circle, and in the middle the lower faculties of the irascible and concupiscible appetites, and of reason and free will, are introverted into the spiritual faculties of intellect, memory, and will. These latter will finish the task and bring the soul into mystical union in the center.

The introversion or ascension starts with the outer or exterior circle, which represents the active life. The means set down by Herp for this first introversion are "truth and compassion." Truth means understanding the goodness of God and the bankruptcy of the human, and compassion is appreciating God's love and attractiveness.

The middle level is the field for aspiratory prayer and unitive love. Aspirations address the "interior inferior powers," especially the concupiscible appetite, which in Herp's view has a spiritual quality about it. Unitive love is exercised by the spiritual faculties. Understanding guides the process: hence the importance of regular meditation and of the use of prepared ejaculations that recall the supreme attraction of God and serve to inflame the soul with love. The awakened

will moves the sensory faculties to yearn for God, progressively spiritualizing the person for the work of unitive love. For Herp, unitive love takes over the task begun in the lower interior faculties. The acts of pure, unitive love finish the task of the introversion of the spirit level and open the way to the center. In the center the love is fruitive love. The contemplative way is left behind, and the soul now lives the "super-essential life" of oneness with the Trinity, a union that is not ontological but psychological.

Herp offers some good pastoral advice. The stages are to be addressed in order and none can be skipped. Basic conversion is presupposed for undertaking aspiratory prayer, and that means an adult knowledge of God and one's self and the acquisition of the moral virtues. Aspiratory prayer begins with rote expressions of love and fervor. According to Herp, these feelings crescendo into what he calls an explosion of love, which has its own danger of entrapping the person in the delightful, sensible sweetness. The love is gradually purified and becomes the unitive love that will lead the soul into the center. Unitive love too undergoes its own purifications, and the follow-up experiences may be as dark and dry as the initial entry was exalted. The challenge at this point, as at every point in the spiritual life, is marginalizing the self, that is, letting go of everything that is not God. The holy soul practicing spiritual love will continue to work at the total gift of self to God, and its tasks are listed by Herp as self-offering, searching for God's will, letting God's love destroy all defects, and being united with God.

### **John of St. Samson (1571-1636)**

John of St. Samson is an immensely important figure in the Carmel of the Ancient Observance. He was a mystic of

profound experience, and, in spite of the blindness that afflicted him from the age of three, he was well educated and well read, keeping in touch with currents of spirituality in the very rich 17th century. He has been called the French John of the Cross and is highly esteemed by religious historians like Henri Bremond and Louis Cognet.

John of St. Samson lived a century and a half after Herp, but Herp's work was well known to him in the numerous Latin and French translations and in the plethora of spiritual writings that popularized aspiratory prayer. John of St. Samson became expert in the teaching of this way, building on Herp but adding his own points of view. There had been a lot of writing, but little development since Herp. After a careful comparison of the two authors, Canisius Janssen concludes that John's doctrine is Herp in a new packaging. "Certain things have been left out," he writes, "others developed; in short the whole has acquired a new face."<sup>9</sup>

John belongs to the same Dutch school of mysticism as Herp, both of them appropriating the worldview of Ruusbroec. We come from God as created images in the Uncreated Word, and our life goal is to return to our place in the Word in full consciousness of our unity in God. The goal is put rather abstractly as "the state of consummation of the subject in the Object" in a "union without difference or distinction." Such is the transforming union, in which the soul is caught up in the fire of the divine life. The way to the goal is introversion according to the same divisions as in Henry Herp, but with the adaptations in nomenclature.

John is particularly eloquent in explaining how spiritual love guides the whole process of introversion once aspirations become the way. Spiritual love is

at the heart of sensible-spiritual aspirations, and it constitutes the spiritual aspirations that lead one into the center itself. Aspirations have the genius of putting our full humanity to work by engaging our feelings and emotions as well as our spirit. Sensible love is the starter, and it houses the spiritual love in sensible-spiritual aspirations. When the aspirations become "more vigorous, more on fire, and more detached from sense," they are pure spiritual love. This spiritual love, with or without a sensible component, is the engine that drives the introversion process into the furnace that is God.

Aspiration thus has a mystical quality in John, as is clear from the following quotation:

Aspiration is not only an affectionate colloquy. . . ; that is what aspiration is born of and comes forth from. Aspiration, then, is an outpouring of the whole heart and spirit on fire with love. By it the soul quickly transcends itself and all of creation, becoming intimately united with God in the intensity of its loving expression. Expressing itself quintessentially in this way, the soul transcends all tender, sensible, cerebral, and comprehensible love, reaching by the vehemence of God's spirit and its own effort, not just any divine union, but a sudden transformation of its spirit into God. In the abounding and ineffable sweetness of God himself lovingly embracing one's spirit, it transcends, I say, all familiar and intelligible love. This is the essence of aspiration, in itself, in its cause, and in its effect.<sup>10</sup>

Heart (that is, the sensibility) and spirit (that is, the loving will) are the framers of aspirations, and heart eventually recedes in favor of pure spirit. In the beginning there will be multiplicity of thought and feelings, but

with growth this richness will give way to ever increasing simplicity and a state of pure elevation in God. Intensity is of the essence, since only strong love can break the attachments of the faculties to their natural objects. Frequency is a necessary quality, since the goal is to make aspirations like second nature, as natural as breathing. Humility too is the essential underpinning of all true love. But in all these efforts balance and moderation must prevent any violence or excessive force. John of St. Samson, experienced spiritual director, has good advice on how to begin and how to grow in this beautiful practice, and his reflections will help us put our topic in perspective.

Who are candidates for this prayer? The prayer is not for everybody. It is not for intellectuals or for shallow people who live on the surface of things and whose fire burns up quickly like straw. It is for generous souls of strong will who are concerned about their interior life.

When to begin? Brother John sees aspirations as a higher form of prayer; hence he is hesitant to promote it indiscriminately. Aware of the dangers of too much emotionality as well as its necessary predispositions, he counsels against beginning the prayer prematurely. Strain and force must be resisted lest there be physical or psychological harm. It is necessary to guard against a too sanguine assessment of one's love of God. The apostle Peter felt a great love for Jesus that led to presumption and his denial of Jesus in the courtyard. John's basic condition for the practice is a mortified life. He fears the unguarded attraction of the sweetness of this love. So he writes: "To begin this exercise it is absolutely necessary to die to ourselves, to humble ourselves, and to be self-effacing (*mepriser*)."<sup>11</sup> John is probably thinking of his own novices and their year of novitiate when he writes that candidates for this prayer

should have spent “a good year” in discursive meditation and affective prayer before taking up aspirations. He also warns newcomers that beginnings will be troublesome, even painful, but practice makes perfect and easy.

The process of introversion follows Herp detail for detail. Like Herp, John of St. Samson is lyrical in his descriptions of the outcome of introversion, which is entrance into “the marvelous effects and the spiritual inebriation” of touching the fond or ground of one’s being, where the Holy Trinity dwells and the essential union with God takes place. This mystical state is transformation in the fire that is God.

### **Aspiratory Prayer in Contemplative Life Today**

It remains to suggest ways in which this body of teaching can be put into practice in today’s contemplative setting.

A first step, and one that is often presented in the literature, is to connect aspirations with the practice of the presence of God. This means to murmur aspirations frequently during the course of the day to remind oneself of the presence of God and to offer up the present task. This is one application in *The Carmelite Directory of the Spiritual Life* by John Breninger OCarm and in the works of his student Kilian J. Healy OCarm.<sup>12</sup>

A second application is to introduce aspirations into one’s daily meditation in whatever form that takes. This will be an affective addition in the nondiscursive meditation of Christian Meditation, which features the mantra “Maranatha.” The mantra itself could be the vehicle expressing love and desire. Bringing aspiration into centering prayer may be a bit more difficult, since this prayer eschews thinking and emoting. Aspirative prayer may be disruptive of the

silence of centering prayer. Perhaps aspirations that are expressed without words and in silence can be a friendly addition and add warmth and fervor to centering prayer.

A third way to practice aspirations in one’s daily prayer is to structure it much like the two disciplines of contemplative prayer. Periods of aspiratory prayer could be cultivated each day, twenty minutes to a half hour in length, with the whole time given over to aspirations.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), pp. 186-189.

<sup>2</sup> Aspiratory prayer is more at home with the language of love than with the Greek categories of contemplation. The literature of the Touraine Reform seems to prefer the evangelical language. One of my esteemed Carmelite teachers and mentors over a lifetime, whose life and studies were dominated by Touraine, frequently showed annoyance at the ambiguities of the vocabulary of contemplation. he preferred to speak of “love” and “loving” as the true measure of prayer rather than different forms of “contemplation” or “contemplative.” Instead of describing Carmelite life as “contemplative,” he preferred the simple word “prayerful.” I interpreted his attitude as a reflection of the viewpoint of Touraine.

<sup>3</sup> Canisius Janssen OCarm surveys the sources of aspiratory prayer in the first of two excellent articles on the history and theology of aspiratory prayers, “Oraison aspirative chez Herp et chez ses prédécesseurs,” *Carmelus* 3 (1956): 19-48. It lists the sources of this prayer in earlier times before its first major exponent, Henry Herp. These sources turn out to be the same texts cited in studies on the roots of centering prayer and Christian

Meditation. An example of the latter is Robert W. Ginn's defense against critics, "Centering Prayer: Reviving the Ancient Christian Tradition in Modern Times," a manuscript dated 5/26/05 and circulated by Contemplative Outreach. Janssen's second article is titled "L'oraison aspirative chez Jean de Sait Samson," *Carmelus* 3 (1956): 185-216. I wish to express my gratitude for these two studies and my indebtedness to them in the formation of the present paper.

<sup>4</sup> *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginning* (New York: Paulist, 2000), pp. 9-10. Christian mystics from Origen on applied the imagery of the Song of Songs to their relationship with God. St. Thérèse of Lisieux belongs to this group, and a dominant feature of her prayer was aspiration. See Romero de Lima Gouvea OCarm, "Vivre d'amour: la prière aspirative chez Thérèse de L'Enfant Jesus (1873-1897)," *Carmelus* 47 (2000): 19-40.

<sup>5</sup> See Ernest E. Larkin "Carm, "The Little Way of St. Thérèse of Lisieux," Review for *Religious* 59 (September-October 2000); 507-517, at 514-515.

<sup>6</sup> The Touraine Reform is not as well known as its counterpart, the Discalced Reform begun by St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spain. Touraine began in Brittany in northwest France in the next century. Like the Discalced Reform, it was a radical return to the primitive spirit of the order. Unlike the Discalced Reform, Touraine did not become juridically separated from the old order, but remained in the trunk and spread to every province as the "strictior observantia." See Kilian J. Healy OCarm, *Methods of Prayer in the Directory of the Carmelite Reform of Touraine* (Rome: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1956), pp. 15-21.

<sup>7</sup> Janssen, *Carmelus* 3, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> This is the conclusion of James Walsh SJ in his introduction to the Classics of Western Spirituality edition of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Paulist, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> Janssen, *Carmelus* 3, p. 210.

<sup>10</sup> Jean de St. Samson, *L'éguillon, les flames, les fleches, et le miroir de l'amour de Dieu*, in *Oevres completes* I, edition critique par Hein Blommestijn (Rome: Institutum Carmelitanum, 1992), p. 98, Aspiration done n'est pas seulement un colloque affectueux. . .; c'est d'icelui que naît et procede l'aspiration. Aspiration done est un poussement amoureux enflame de tout le Coeur et l'esprit; par lequel l'ame surpasse proutement elle mesme et toute chose créée, s'unissant étroitement á Dieu en la vivacité de son expression amoureuse; laquelle ainsi Essentiellement exprimée, surpasse tout amour sensible, raisonnable, intellectuel et comprehensible; arrivant par l'impetuosité de l'esprit de Dieu et de son effort, a l'union de Dieu, non tellement quellement, mais par une soudaine transformation de l'esprit en Dieu. L'esprit, dis-je, surpasse en lui meme tout l'amour connessable et intelligible en l'abondante et ineffable suavité de Dieu mesme, auquel il est amoureusement englouti.

Voilà que c'est que l'aspriation Essentielle en elle meme, sa cause et son effet. (The passage is cited by Janssen in the article on John of St. Samson, p. 195. The translation has been made from the text in the critical edition cited above.)

<sup>11</sup> Janssen, *Carmelus* 3, p. 204.

<sup>12</sup> The translation of the *Directorium Carmelitanum* was made from the Latin by Leo J. Walter OCarm (Chicago: Carmelite Press, 1951). See also Kilian J. Healy, *Walking with God* (New York: Declan X. McMullen, 1948), reprinted as *Awakening Your Soul to the Presence of God* (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia



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Institute Press, 1999); see also his chapter in  
*Methods of Prayer*, pp. 60-75.