

GABRIEL BUNGE OSB, *Earthen Vessels. The Practice of Personal Prayer According to the Patristic Tradition* translated by Michael J. Miller, pen and ink drawings by Francesco Riganti (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 222 pages.

This book on prayer according to the early Christian tradition, which has been translated into nine languages since 1996<sup>1</sup> (the first was Romanian) cannot and should not be tackled as an ordinary text. It is written by somebody who is widely recognised by patristic scholars as the most congenial interpreter of Evagrius Ponticus (345-399), and a connoisseur of the Eastern orthodox tradition. Hieromonk Gabriel Bunge is not just the one who translated from Syriac into German the letters of Evagrius (*Briefe aus der Wüste*, Trier, 1986), or the author, during the last two decades, of more than a dozen articles and books that convincingly challenge the standard view on this outstanding figure of the Egyptian monasticism.<sup>2</sup> (This "standard view" is due to the respectable and yet seriously one-sided work of the French scholar, A. Guillaumont, who never managed to revise his unilateral thesis on Evagrius published at Paris in 1962<sup>3</sup>; Guillaumont's impact on the international scholarship was considerable, being taken for granted by important theologians or historians of religion, such as J. Meyendorff or I. P. Culianu.) The author of this book is not just an authority in the early monastic studies, but himself a monk living for more than twenty years as a hermit in the mountains of Switzerland (Ticino). For that reason, Fr Gabriel Bunge seems to be, alas, a *rara avis* among the contemporary scholars of religion. He writes about this crucial theme not merely out of sympathetic curiosity for his "object" of research (the Church Fathers). There is certainly more than that in this book, and one can notice it

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<sup>1</sup> The German original is G. BUNGE, *Irdene Gefäß: Die Praxis der persönlichen Gebets nach der Überlieferung der heiligen Väter* (Würzburg: Der Christliche Osten, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Among many titles, see GABRIEL BUNGE, *Akedía. Die Geistliche Lehre des Evagrius Pontikos vom Überdruß* (Würzburg: Der Christliche Osten, 1995<sup>4</sup>), Romanian translation by Ioan I. Ică Jr. (Sibiu: Deisis Press, 1998); "Origenismus-Gnostizismus. Zum geistesgeschichtlichen Standort des Evagrius Pontikos" *Vigiliae Christianae* 40 (1986), 24-54; "The 'Spiritual Prayer', On the Trinitarian Mysticism of Evagrius of Pontus" *Monastic Studies* 17 (1987), 191-208; *Geistliche Vaterschaft. Christliche Gnosis bei Evagrius Pontikos* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1988), Romanian translation by Ioan I. Ică Jr. (Sibiu: Deisis Press, 1999); "Hénade ou Monade? Au sujet de deux notions centrales de la terminologie évagrienne", *Le Muséon* 102 (1989), 69-91; "Mysterium Unitatis. Der Gedanke der Einheit von Schöpfer und Geschöpf in der evagriianischen Mystik", *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 36 (1989), 449-69; "'Nach dem Intellekt Leben', zum sog. 'Intellektualismus' der evagriianischen Spiritualität" in W. Nyssen (ed.), *Simandron. Festschrift für K. Gamber* (Cologne: Luthé, 1989); "Der mystische Sinn der Schrift. Anlässlich der Veröffentlichung der Scholien zum Ecclesiasten des Evagrius Pontikos", *Studia Monastica* 36 (1994), 135-46; GABRIEL BUNGE & ADALBERT DE VOGÜÉ, *Quatre ermites égyptiens, d'après les fragments coptes de l'Histoire Lausiaque*, presented by Gabriel Bunge, translated by Adalbert de Vogüé (Bérolles-en-Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1994); "Commentary on the Prologue of the *Antirrhētikos* by Evagrius of Pontus", *Studia Monastica* 39 (1997) 1, 77-105; *Drachenwein und Engelsbrot. Die Lehre des Evagrius Pontikos von Zorn und Sanftmut* (Würzburg: Der Christliche Osten, 1999), Romanian translation by Ioan I. Ică Jr. (Sibiu: Deisis Press, 1998); G. BUNGE, "Created and Renewed after the Image of God" in *Homo Medietas. Aufsätze zu Religiosität, Literatur und Denkformen des Menschen vom Mittelalter bis in die Neuzeit*; *Festschrift für Alois Maria Haas zum 65. Geburtstag* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> A. GUILLAUMONT, *Les „Kephalaia Gnostica“ d'Evagre le Pontique et l'histoire d'Origenisme chez les Grecs et chez les Syriens* (Patristica Sorbonensia 5), Paris, 1962.

from the very beginning. It is not just the hermeneutic or a contextual sympathy, but an emergent sense of duty and reality that compelled Fr Gabriel to write this book, first dedicated to his disciple, monk Rafaele (who passed away – *aeonia ē mnēmē autou* – this year aged just forty-three).

In German, the original title runs like this: *Irdene Gefäße: Die Praxis des persönlichen Gebetes nach der Überlieferung der heiligen Väter* (Würzburg, 1996). The rather traditional formula “*Church Fathers*” has been dropped out in favour of a more academic phrase, but apart from this, one finds nothing new in the English translation, which flows beautifully on almost every page. Fr Gabriel’s main sources in writing this book were the works of Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Evagrius (massively used for its comprehensive genius), the *Apophtegmata Patrum* and the letters of Barsanuphios and John. As a novelty appears the reference to the Syrian tradition, in particular to such an important and yet insufficiently known author as Joseph Hazzaya (*On the Three Stages of the Spiritual Life*). At stake, obviously, it is not a historical or a synoptic presentation of what these “biblical men” (and others, equally important) had to say about prayer. For that purpose, the reader can use with much profit Thomaš Spidlík’s second volume of his masterful handbook called “The Spirituality of the Christian East” (Rome: 1984-1999). At half way between the scholar monograph and the personal essay (beautifully decorated with the drawings of F. Riganti), *this* book about prayer is divided into four chapters and one appendix (“Practical Advice”), each heading including a biblical quotation. This gives the reader a first and a most important impression: the earliest Christian doctrine about prayer is embedded in the biblical text; it speaks the language of the Scriptures, searching for inspiration from the divine Word. Prayer is not an activity separated from theology, but its very *premise* and *promise*. First, it is the premise of theology, since prayer is at the beginning of *any* Christian activity; it is also the promise, since theology, in Christian understanding, is committed not just to convert, but to converse endlessly with enlightened words of glory. The words uttered in prayer by the early Christians, could *always* be recognised by their distinctive scriptural flavour. This emphasis addresses nowadays the confusions that occurred, over the centuries, by the loss of an embodied contact with the living *paradosis* of the Church Fathers (*op. cit.*, p. 15). The practice of prayer of the early Christians appears to most of us as a dead language of only limited intelligibility. We shall return to this analogy between prayer and language, which might help us to understand better the early Christian understanding of this central act for any religious life.

One of the contemporary confusions concerns the relationship between “prayer”, “psalmody”, and “meditation”. The most straightforward answer to the first misunderstanding can be given by quoting Evagrius, who clearly states that “psalmody belongs to the realm of «manifold wisdom» (Eph 3: 10), whereas prayer is the prelude to immaterial knowledge, which is not manifold” (*De oratione* 85). In other words, the Psalms include many narrative passages (such as the recollections of the divine miracles in Israel’s history of salvation), which are not implied by the proper act of prayer (which is conversation – *homilia* – with God). Adalbert de Vogüé has

written more about this important distinction in his article „Psalmes n'est pas prier" published in *Ecclesia Orans* 6 (1989), 7-32. With respect to meditation (*meletē*), the modern reader will be even more surprised to find the ancient Christian meaning of this practice. "By «meditation» the Fathers (and the psalmist himself) understood a constant repetition of certain verses or entire passages of Sacred Scripture *sotto voce* (Ps 34: 38; 36:30; 70:24) – in an undertone –, with the aim of grasping their hidden spiritual sense" (G. Bunge, *op. cit.*, 44). Thus, meditation is far from any Cartesian concept of critical reflection (cf. *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia*), being likewise distant from the more or less secularised versions of Oriental religious practices, which pursue the inner calm, bodily relaxation and mental awakening as ultimate "spiritual goals" in themselves. Unlike the modern philosophical understanding of meditation (which stayed intact from Descartes to Husserl), the early Christian practice lacked the analytic reasoning upon things which are waiting for a rather different grasp (namely, the Holy Scriptures and the divine works in creation). Meditation also, as it was practised by the Desert Fathers, was never empty of *any* content of thought, as surely is the case with Zen practices, and probably also with the original Buddhist *dhyana*.

Unfortunately, Fr Gabriel Bunge does not attempt a detailed comparison of the early Christian understanding of prayer with other religious traditions, and perhaps such digression could not fit the profile of his book. When reference is made to non-Christian traditions, the degree of generality is quite frustrating, since they are quickly labelled as "oriental" and, therefore, "impersonal" religions. This latter accusation has become a common place among the Christian theologians who deal with the strenuous challenges of the most important event of 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is *la rencontre des religions*. Fr Gabriel is certainly right in accusing the superficiality of the common approach of the Western man towards non-European practices such as Zen-Buddhism (*ibid.*, 188), which tend to be similar also with respect to some (historically speaking) closer religious traditions. Indeed, too often and far too easily, Western people approach Eastern Orthodoxy, for example, with the utilitarian criteria of looking for something to suit his or her own religious, aesthetic or even "spiritual" taste. Such an attitude completely falsifies the claims of the Christian tradition, puts in the brackets the foundational act of faith, makes of truth an optional value, or a matter of choice (the sin of subjectivism), and leaves aside the claim for universality that characterises the biblical revelation. This potential tension should be always borne in mind, against the myriad of painless fusions or cursory assessments, made either by "religious initiates", ecclesiastical ecumenists or enthusiastic scholars. On the other hand, it is too convenient to oppose the "Christian personalism" to the "oriental impersonal religions", at least for two reasons. First, simply because one needs first to apply the principle "*audiatur et altera pars*", and to understand if there is any legitimacy in this charge (which needs clear specifications). Secondly, because, on the Christian side, it would be hazardous to represent the patristic Trinitarian doctrine wrapped in the personalistic jargon, saying that God "is Person in the absolute sense" (*op.cit.*, 12), more than He could be called, for instance,

"Nature (or Being, *ho šn*) *par excellence*". It would be certainly hard to find any Greek or Latin equivalent for the modern expression "the Person of God" (*op.cit.*, 147), and more likely to discover the origin of this theological language in the modern Jewish dialogical theism of F. Rosenzweig and M. Buber. *Pace* orthodox theologians such as Ch. Yannaras or J. Zizioulas, this thesis has been demonstrated by the patristic scholar André de Halleux in his exquisite article, 'Personnalisme ou essentialisme trinitaire chez les Pères cappadociens', *Patrologie et Oecuménisme* (Louvain: Peeters, 1990), 215-268. If, nowadays, to attribute to the Christian East a "personalistic theology", and to ascribe to the Christian West an "essentialist metaphysics", turns out to be a mere allegation, even a unjustifiable one, one needs to ponder seriously the veracity of the accusation made by the Christians against the "impersonal" character of the oriental religions. This observation is particularly important since the main works which Fr Gabriel Bunge relies on were written by Evagrius Ponticus. In a seminal article from 1939 ('Metaphysik und Mystik des Evagrius Ponticus', *Zeitschrift für Askese und Mystik*, vol. 14, p. 31-47), the famous Roman-Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar thought it appropriate to compare (though mistakenly) Evagrius' doctrine of prayer with Buddhist spirituality. This shows that even for the most cultivated scholars of Christian formation the distance between East and West is, at least conceptually, not always self-evident.

The second chapter of the book tells us much about the symbolic representation of this fundamental religious act in the early Christian Church. The words used in prayer (almost all of biblical inspiration) were to match the syntax, or the grammar of life in the Spirit, lived both individually and in communion with others. Therefore, the places and the times of prayer were of crucial importance, outlining particular attitudes hardly understood by the modern man who lives in a "demythologised", homogenised, and non-symbolic cosmos. Turning towards east, standing up or kneeling down at certain moments, lifting up the hands, crossing oneself, various ways of tuning the voice, prostrations in front of the icons – all these are attitudes largely forgotten by contemporary Christians, or dimly practised by a minority, into a context more resembling magic than the coherence of the religious performance in the early communities. Fr Gabriel recalls the analogy between "prayer" and "art", which suggests that prayer relates always to the totality of one's being, and not just to a particular function of our intellect, or to the need of our heart to express its feelings. Just like with every religious symbol, the sign of the cross (*signaculum*), for instance, was saturated with various significations as the time passed: it was first performed in the name of Jesus Christ (remembering his saving Passion), then in the name of the Trinity; also, "at first was traced mainly on one's own forehead, probably with just one finger, both in the Greek East and the Latin West" (*op. cit.*, 184). Later on, as Peter Damascene (11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century) gives testimony, two fingers and one hand were used (a gesture preserved by the Russian Old Believers until today), as a "mute profession of the two natures of the incarnate Word in one «hypostasis»" (*ibid.*, 185). When the three fingers started being used (in order to represent the doctrine of

Trinity), the direction was clearly (both in East and West) from right to the left, and only the schism between Rome and Constantinople (1054) allowed the former religious centre the freedom to change this practice, in need for polemical difference and historical discontinuity.

This book by Fr Gabriel Bunge brings out a wealth of such illuminating examples, and none of them is affected by any confessional prejudice. The pace of the exposition is slow, the commentaries are gentle and piercing. The lesson we learn is that Christian "prayer", in its primary understanding, was practised as a complex language (or art) involving a set of unsurpassable paradoxes. Like any human language, prayer is learnt at best not from books, but within a living tradition. The 'master'/'disciple' relationship is unavoidable, and yet the initiation does not have an esoteric flavour (the Desert Fathers, in particular, are well-known for their claim, made at the hour of their death, to be only beginners in the spiritual life). One learns this language of prayer with pain, in which the exercise of repetition becomes *mater studiorum*. Starting from scratch, one encounters first a set of non-negotiable commandments (the level of *praktikē*), the equivalent of those normative rules in grammar such as the inflections of nouns, pronouns or adjectives, or the conjugation of regular and irregular verbs. One learns this spiritual language with a specific accent that relate to his place of birth and the proficiency of his teacher. The tacit knowledge, which assists the focal attention of the pupil, is of radical importance, just like in acquiring manual skills. As we have seen, the language of prayer, which involves bodily gestures and unseen or inner attitudes, tuned for specific spiritual states, can be creative *only* when it is truly inspired. It can certainly evolve, since many words or gestures receive new connotations, according to the celebrant's spiritual and historical situation. But what is most important, says Fr Gabriel, is that the Christian language of prayer cannot be spoken without an unadulterated commitment to faith, which assists all stages of one's spiritual life (*praktikē*, *physikē thesria*, *theologia* or *pneumatikē thesria*). Prayer describes at best the relational dimension of the *homo religiosus* and, therefore, it can never remain, in a Christian viewpoint, an individual exercise of the pious soul. The faith that the neophyte acquires is always mediated by the cumulative perceptions of the community of believers (*ekklesia*), in which he or she is introduced. In short, it would be more adequate to describe the Christian experience of learning the language (or the art) of prayer not as the handing over of a lesson from the master to the novice (keeping, thus, the individualist terms), but as the integration of one's primitive understanding into the vast stream of the ecclesial consciousness, which cannot be but catholic (i.e.: universal). Fr Gabriel is excellent in making clear that the Church tradition shapes this individual training in the virtues of prayer, and not an arbitrary will that sets itself as the only canon of truth, beyond the past and ahead of the future.

Prayer, within the Christian tradition, behaves certainly as a language, and Fr Gabriel even suggests that understanding prayer is somehow a matter of grammatology (*op. cit.*, 193). Nowadays, one feels the immediate need to trace back not just the right spelling of the right words in prayer but, what is far more difficult, its intonation, the way of uttering, the

place for the required pauses in reading, and so on. It is an enterprise not simpler than the work of the epigraphers, who have to figure out what an ancient (say, Greek) text means when all its diacritical marks have disappeared. And let us imagine that the original meaning of that text, or part of literature, is miraculously recovered and understood: can we then hope that we shall ever *speak* naturally that language, just like our ancestors? With this question, we return to the inescapable problem of the tradition. How do we learn something like the art of prayer that comes almost exclusively from the past? Is there any *method* for acquiring it? If we accept that prayer is closer to a language than to mathematics (as Gregory of Nazianzus put it: "what does geometry have to do with tears?"), then the answer is unequivocal: the art prayer, just like theology, cannot be learnt if we resign ourselves to tolerating any break in the formative tradition of the Christian *ekklēsia*. This is the final and the brainstorming paradox of Fr Gabriel Bunge's extraordinary book: it makes clear that, for those who really want to dig for the "earthen vessels", or to know "the practice of personal prayer according to the patristic tradition", reading *this* book of profound simplicity, and even meeting *de visu* its author, would be still insufficient. They both are only pointers to something which, as a pure gift, transcends altogether those who give and those who receive. Acceptance of this would represent the beginning of that way that needs no journals or reviewers.

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