



Lukas Vischer: Intercession

1. Place and Date of Publication

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2. Historical Context

From 1961 to 1979, Lukas Vischer served the World Council of Churches as research secretary and director of the Commission on Faith and Order. His book “*Intercession*” (original: “*Fürbitte*”, 1979) was the theological foundation of the WCC Ecumenical Prayer Cycle “*For All God’s People*” (1978).

3. Summary

The World Council of Churches has recently made a concrete proposal. Each week throughout the year, the churches should all pray for the churches in one particular part of the world. So it becomes possible, at least once a year, to “visit” in prayer all the churches, to imagine the situation in each region, and to envisage clearly the kind of solidarity that might be required.

Intercession is not only an integral part of Christ’s life and work, but runs also right through the Old Testament. Intercessors such as Abraham, Moses, the prophets, Job, the kings, the High Priest and angels, are able to move God: to secure blessing, avert judgement, and persuade God to intervene with miraculous deeds. They pray that God’s own promise to be gracious to his people should be fulfilled despite its faithlessness and disobedience. Intercession entails suffering, crystallized in the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. Jesus’ intercession is especially concerned with the disciples. But in the end he includes even those Jews and Romans who were directly responsible for his execution. For the apostolic community, Jesus represents God’s love on earth that shines through wrath and judgement. In John 17 Jesus prays that God may fill his disciples with his presence and so make them signs of his presence in the world. The richest intercessory material is undoubtedly found in the letters of Paul. Some characteristics are: 1) “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you.” 2) He prays that they may be equipped for their mission and be kept faithful to the last day. 3) He takes the situation of the congregations into account. 4) He asks the congregations to pray for him and his mission. 5) The fellowship between Paul and the congregations is marked by suffering for the Gospel.

The WCC proposal might have far-reaching consequences for the ecumenical movement as the churches will have to re-examine their mutual relationship in the light of their responsibility to Christ. Mutual intercession has a variety of aspects. It means giving thanks to God for one another. It will normally be the threshold to action of solidarity in giving and receiving. It will start in the own locality. It needs a constant interchange of up-to-date information. It calls for selectivity in practical relationships and must yet be aware that those particular relationships are only part of the larger whole. The concern for all churches helps to prevent acute political intercession from being dictated by headlines. Above all will intercession be offered for those who suffer for the sake of the Gospel. A special situation arises when injustice, persecution and suffering are inflicted by Christians. Intercession must then be combined with frank repudiation and, normally, public resistance. – The Church brings in its intercession its hopes and works to God. God’s mercy and judgement may not meet its expectations. As the Church trusts itself to God, however, it is at the same time protected from the paralyzing effects of failure. It remains free for the future and open for love.

LUKAS VISCHER

INTERCESSION

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CONTENTS

I. Pray for One Another — a Suggestion to the Divided Churches	1
II. What Is Intercession?	5
III. Intercession in Israel	8
1. Abraham	9
2. Moses	10
3. Elijah and Elisha — Prophets as Intercessors	12
4. Amos and Jeremiah	13
5. Job	17
6. Priests	18
7. Intercession by the King — Intercession for the King	22
8. Angels	24
9. Some Conclusions	25
10. The Suffering Servant of God	28
IV. Jesus Christ — Advocate with the Father	30
1. The Intercession of Jesus on Earth	30
2. He Who Pleads For Us	32

3. Priest for Ever	34
4. Jesus' Prayer for the Sanctification of the Disciples	37
V. Intercession in the Church	40
1. Paul — a Priestly Servant of Jesus Christ	40
2. The Priesthood of All Believers — the Con- gregation's Intercession	46
3. The Eucharistic Celebration	50
VI. Two Special Questions	52
1. The Intercession of Mary and the Saints	52
2. Liturgical Intercession for One's Own Church	55
VII. A Growing Fellowship of Mutual Intercession	57
1. Gratitude for the Existing Fellowship	57
2. Mutual Solidarity	58
3. Knowing Each Other Better	60
4. Intercession for the Persecuted and the Suffer- ing	62
5. Limits of the Church's Proclamation	64
Appendix	65

I. PRAY FOR ONE ANOTHER: A SUGGESTION TO THE DIVIDED CHURCHES

Could the divided churches not give expression to the communion which already exists among them by praying regularly for one another? The divisions and barriers created through the centuries are not yet healed and overcome, of course. But in many respects the churches have drawn much closer together in recent years. The grounds for separation have lost much of their force. Discussion and even cooperation has become the normal thing. No church can now manage without the others. Despite this, however open the churches may be to each other in principle, they still tend to remain within the boundaries of their own particular fellowship. The "others" are still not close enough really to belong to one's own particular fellowship. What happens to them, the witness they bear, their difficulties, their sufferings, do not affect us to the same degree, nor do they awaken the same interest. We still tend in our prayers not to go beyond those closest to us.

But could we not break down this barrier? Could the churches not anticipate the one Church at least to the extent of praying for each other more deliberately? Praying not just for those belonging to the same tradition but for *all* who call on Christ's name? The people of God may still be scattered and divided but surely even now it can begin to grow into one fellowship. The final gathering of the dispersed is still for the future but the Spirit is already at work. The churches have heard the call to unity. Ought we not to be able, therefore, to anticipate the day of fulfilment by practising mutual intercession?

We often speak of the unity of the Church in far too abstract a way, as if it were primarily a notion needing to be

explained and expressed in a common formula. But unity is achieved as human beings are drawn together by their faith in Jesus Christ, with all their gifts and their passion for the Gospel, with their limitations and weaknesses, disobedience and failure. So it is not enough to pray for Church unity, in general; we must be in fellowship with those who, while today are still among the "others", will one day be sisters and brothers in the fullest sense in the one Church. Intercession for the whole people of God leads us to them, permits us to participate in their witness, struggle, anxiety, despair, in their prayer for pardon, in their suffering. To pray for one another means already to accept one another.

How can such mutual intercession become a reality? The World Council of Churches has recently made a simple and concrete proposal. Each week throughout the year, the churches should all pray for the churches in one particular part of the world. They will not pray for those churches only in that one week, of course. But by distributing the different regions over the weeks of the year, it becomes possible for us, at least once a year, to "visit" in prayer all the churches, to imagine the situation in each region, and to envisage clearly the kind of solidarity which could be required of us. The idea is to help us to keep in "remembrance" the whole people of God and to be able at all times to pray for all the churches.

The suggestion is that we should pray each week for *all* the churches of a particular region. They are to be seen as a fellowship, as the people called by God to glorify his name in that particular region of the world. They may be divided from each other, they may have very little to do with each other, but intercession starts from the unity given them through the Gospel. Intercession sees more clearly than perhaps they do themselves what binds them together. Intercession gives us the opportunity to praise God for their witness, to thank him for the strength and encouragement we receive from them, to pray for his presence with them, for their unity and their mission, to show our real solidarity with them and, as we try to understand their situation, to be ready also to be shown new ways ourselves.

Worship will be enriched by this “remembrance” and our individual prayers more deeply anchored in the life of the whole Church.

The Church described in the New Testament is a fellowship bound together by the bond of intercession. This New Testament evidence is the basis of the proposal. Jesus prays for his disciples that they may be one. The apostle prays for the churches that they may be strengthened and he finds himself strengthened for his own ministry by their prayers. Intercession is one of the marks of the fellowship born of faith in Christ. Christians will praise God for the gift He has imparted to all through Christ’s death and resurrection. In praising him, each member of the fellowship will also praise him for all those who, with him, have received and accepted this gift. They will praise God together for the fellowship into which they have been brought by his gift. It is this vision of a fellowship in thanksgiving, praise and love which constrains us to pray for one another today. Admittedly it is not easy to recognize this New Testament picture of the Church in the present condition of the churches. But in praying for all the churches, we are praying that this picture may be fully restored. Indeed, we can even say that this already begins to happen the moment we really begin to pray for one another.

Prayer for all the churches who confess Christ is therefore a standing protest against the *status quo* of our divisions. God’s gift of reconciliation can and should find full expression. Its purpose is to establish fellowship.

Its aim is that the Church should become a real sign of reconciliation in the world. When intercession is restricted exclusively to our own community, this dimension of hope is lost. Intercession becomes, unnoticed, a means of preserving the unity we already have, or rather, the limited unities in which we live. It is no longer nourished by the longing for Christ’s name to be glorified in all who believe in him. It serves instead to sharpen the existing lines of division between the churches. Most of the prayers offered in the majority of churches are wittingly or unwittingly of this kind. However ostensibly “catholic” they may be, they are still essentially sectarian.

From the very beginning intercession has been intimately connected with the celebration of the Eucharist. Prayer for the Church, its unity and witness, is part of the eucharistic liturgy. The signs instituted by Christ remind us of his life, death and resurrection. At the same time they remind us of the fellowship of faith brought into being by him. The full significance of the Eucharist can therefore only become visible when it is celebrated in unity. Our preparation for the Eucharist, therefore, must include the effort to restore fellowship, to strengthen it where it is threatened and to renew it where it has been broken.

Intercession is part of this preparation. We bring the fellowship of faith to God in prayer and ask him to strengthen and renew it. We confess that this fellowship can only be preserved by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are still not able to come together at the Lord's table. We still have to celebrate the Eucharist today inside the boundaries drawn by our divisions. When we pray for each other, however, we reach across these boundaries. We include in our celebration those who still do not share in it. By doing so we make clear the missing element in our celebration. Our consciences are kept alert to the truth that the fellowship which Christ offers us in this visible sign is even more inclusive and richer than the fellowship so far achieved. Intercession encourages us to celebrate the sacrament in the fullness of fellowship. It is the door now standing open for those hitherto excluded. It not only invites us to identify ourselves with our own fellowship but also summons us to go out and seek the "others". Surely, then, intercession for all who confess Jesus Christ should be an integral part of every celebration of the Eucharist.

II. WHAT IS INTERCESSION?

We are tempted to assume that intercession is primarily a special kind of prayer. This is how it is usually defined in the dictionaries. Turn to the word “intercession” and you are referred to the article on “prayer”. There you find a general introduction on prayer, followed by an exposition of the different kinds of prayer: adoration, thanksgiving, praise, petition, intercession. The section on intercession usually comes last and sets out to explain what praying for others means. Making use of illustrations from the Bible and the history of the Church, it offers an account of the spirituality of intercession as practised in the Christian Church.

Helpful as such classifications and descriptions are, they fail to do justice to the underlying inspiration of all intercession, namely, its source in Christ himself. Intercession is an integral part of his whole life and work. Intercession is not primarily an expression of human piety. Its real significance can only be grasped in the light of Christ’s own intercession. Whenever we pray for others we are in essence simply continuing what He did for us.

The entire work of Christ can be presented from this standpoint, as intercession. In one sense, what he did was simply to intercede for us all. He meets us all with perfect love. He bears the burdens of others. He heals, He sets us free at the cost of his own freedom. He ends his life on a cross. By his life and by his death, he brings us into the presence of God in order that we may be welcomed into fellowship with him. His life and his death are an intercession, above all, for his disciples. By his intercession they are set free for a new life, united in a new fellowship, and called to bear witness in the world. But not just the disciples; also those who believe in him

because of their preaching and action. He prayed for them and continues to pray: "that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." He is the source of the fellowship which binds them to each other. When they intercede for one another with God, his intercession is there in the background. It leaves its stamp on what they are able to do for one another.

If we are to understand Christ as the basis of intercession, however, we must see him in the setting of the whole Bible. The theme of intercession runs right through the Old Testament. Abraham, Moses and, above all, the prophets interceded for the people. The conviction that we not only can but should intercede with God for others is deeply rooted in the Old Testament. The New Testament picks up and develops the theme. The Old Testament witnesses are, so to speak, concentrated and united in Christ and in the Church's proclamation.

The proposal put forward in this booklet cannot be rightly understood without reference to this real basis of intercession. It would be easy to misinterpret this call to the churches to pray for one another. It sounds as if intercession could be treated as a means, as a religious device to be used in the service of unity. But intercession cannot be severed from the roots by which it is nourished. We may still admire the loveliness of a cut flower, but it is no longer a living thing.

Intercession for each other, therefore, is not a pious exercise to be used by the churches in order to create a new bond of fellowship. It is primarily a human response, not a human initiative we are at liberty to take or refrain from taking.

Essentially, the summons to mutual intercession is simply the call to the churches to return together to the springs of their spiritual life. Turning together again to this source, they will also learn how they are to pray for each other, indeed, how they should live and work together. The converse, too, is also true: in praying for one another they will reach a deeper knowledge and understanding of what, or rather of him, who is the ultimate ground of their unity, the Christ who intercedes for all at God's right hand.

Fellowship with him and fellowship with one another are indissolubly connected. If the proposal to the divided churches is to make sense, we must bring out the significance of this connection.

III. INTERCESSION IN ISRAEL

When we turn to the Bible so see what it has to say about intercession we find that the material is surprisingly rich. Firstly, the Old Testament.¹

One general feature strikes us immediately. To a large extent, the focus of interest in the Old Testament is on the human beings who are in a position to turn in prayer to God for others. Intercession as a general concept is hardly ever mentioned. The narratives and accounts of importance for the theme of intercession are almost all concerned with religious leaders, prophets, sages, priests or kings who had the authority to turn to God in prayer and plead for others. Intercession is clearly not everybody's business. It needs people who are close to God, people to whom God speaks "face to face as a man speaks to his friend" (Ex.33:11).

Intercession is in many respects similar to the act of blessing. The purpose both of the prayer of intercession and of the act of blessing is to obtain God's favour for others: and just as it is not anybody's business to offer intercessions, so too, not just anyone can pronounce the blessing. Special authority is needed for this, too. The differences between intercession and blessing are not to be blurred, of course. Intercession, direct speech with God, seems to have been restricted to people chosen by God to a far greater degree than was the case with the act of blessing. The authority to bless also derives from ties of natural kinship and was, for example, the prerogative of the father in respect of his children.

In isolated passages intercession is practised by larger groups. For example, there are incidental references to this in

¹Franz Hesse, *Die Fürbitte im Alten Testament*, Erlangen Dissertation 1949.

the Psalms (35:13; 109:4) and above all there is Jeremiah's summons to the whole people to pray for the inhabitants of Babylon (Jer.29:7). But these passages hardly alter the overall picture. It seems to have been taken for granted in Israel that special authority was needed for intercession. The same idea may even underlie the summons of Jeremiah to the people in Exile; just as the man of God offers intercession for the people, so the people of God should offer intercession for the pagan world around it. This view of intercession finds further support in the way in which the great intercessors remain alive in the popular memory: Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Elijah, David, Solomon and, above all, the Prophet Jeremiah, are frequently referred to as those who interceded for the people (Ps.106: 23; 2 Macc. 15:12-16; Sirach: 46:16-18; 4 Ezra 7:106-111). Later on, the idea gains ground that they still continue interceding even after their death.

In order to achieve an overall view of intercession in the Old Testament, let us look briefly at the series of great intercessors. Since we cannot refer here to all the relevant passages, we select the most important ones.

1. Abraham

We immediately think here of the well-known story of the destruction of Sodom. But there are other passages, too, in which Abraham is presented as an intercessor. There is the story of Abimelech, King of Gerar, for example (Gen.20). Afraid of being killed, Abraham had pretended that Sarah was his sister. Abimelech took her as his wife but God appeared to him in a dream and pointed out the wrong he had unwittingly committed. The only remedy for his plight is that Abraham should intercede for him. "At Abraham's prayer, God healed Abimelech, his wife and his slave-girls, so that they could have children" (Gen.20:17). Here Abraham appears as the one chosen by God. Abimelech needs his help if he is to be delivered from God's curse. Surprisingly, and significantly, Abraham is explicitly referred to in this narrative as a "prophet" (20:7). His capacity to intercede for others is explained by reference to the fact that he is a pro-

phet. It is clear from this that, in the tradition of Israel, intercession was primarily associated with the prophetic office.

The account of the destruction of Sodom seeks to deal with a specific problem (Gen.18:16-33). Is it right that the just and the unjust alike should suffer the judgment of God? God has decided to destroy Sodom because of its wickedness. Abraham turns to God and begs him to spare the city for the sake of the just people who may live there. God accedes to his request. Certainly he will not let the just perish with the unjust. But the city itself is beyond rescue. The few just people are spared because at the last moment a gateway is opened for them to escape from destruction.

The main point here is the boldness with which Abraham turns to God. He does not hesitate to contend with God that justice may be done. What is the source of Abraham's freedom? In the narrator's view, it is rooted in the promise given to Abraham by God: "I will make you a great nation... I will bless those who bless you; I will curse those who slight you. All the tribes of the earth shall bless themselves by you" (Gen. 12:2-3). The one to whom so great a promise has been made has a special right to speak to God, and even to contradict him (Gen. 18:27ff.).

2. *Moses*

In the case of Moses, intercession is linked especially closely with the Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt. Once Moses has been chosen to lead the people to the promised land, he has access to God whenever the fulfilment of the promise is in jeopardy. Moses appears first of all as one who, in virtue of his intimacy with God, is able to perform exceptional signs and wonders. His prayer brings plague after plague on Egypt, but his prayer is also needed to bring them to an end (Ex.8-10). When the people grumble at the undrinkable bitter water, he calms them because his appeal to God results in the sweetening of the water (Ex. 15:23). He heals Miriam of her leprosy (Num.12:13; cf. 11:2; 21:4-9)

The main struggle of Moses is to ensure that his people are spared from the divine wrath and judgement. How could he

possibly carry out his mission if God dealt with the people as their deeds deserved? Indeed, how could God's own purpose be fulfilled if he gave full vent to his wrath? Even after the people have forfeited all their claim on God by worshipping the golden calf, Moses still refuses to be the messenger of doom. He resists God:

“Yahweh, why should your wrath blaze out against this people of yours whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with arm outstretched and mighty hand? Why let the Egyptians say, Ah, it was in treachery that he brought them out, to do them to death in the mountains and wipe them off the face of the earth? Leave your burning wrath; relent and do not bring this disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, your servants to whom by your own self you swore and made this promise: I will make your offspring as many as the stars of heaven, and all this land which I promised I will give to your descendants, and it shall be their heritage for ever” (Ex.32:11-13 JB).

Later on he intercedes a second time for the people:

“I am grieved; these people have committed a grave sin, making themselves a god of gold. And yet, if it pleased you to forgive this sin of theirs. But if not, then blot me out from the book that you have written.” Yahweh answered Moses, “It is the man who has sinned against me that I shall blot out from my book. Go now, lead the people to the place of which I told you. My angel shall go before you but, on the day of my visitation, I shall punish them for their sin” (Ex. 32:31f).

The role of intercessor is a heavy burden for Moses. Again and again the people provoke God's judgement. Yet Moses clings firmly to the divine promise. He has to admit that God is right, yet he continues to plead with him. The conflict can become almost intolerable. The intercession can turn into a complaint, and Moses even calls on God to kill him so that he will not have to watch God's judgement on his people:

“Why do you treat your servant so badly? Why have I not found favour with you, so that you load on me the weight of all this nation? Was it I who conceived all this people, was it I who gave them birth, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, like a nurse with a baby at the breast, to the land that I swore to give your fathers?’ Where am I to find meat to give to all the people, when they come worrying me so tearfully and say, ‘Give us meat to eat’? I am not able to carry this nation by myself alone; the weight is too much for me. If this is how you want to deal with me, I would rather you killed me! If only I had found favour in your eyes, and not lived to see such misery as this!” (Num. 11:11-15).

Joshua and Samuel, too, plead for Israel in terms similar to Moses’. Joshua prays that the people should not fall into the hands of the Amorites. “What are you going to do for your great name?” he challenges Yahweh (Jos. 7:6-9). Samuel, the charismatic leader of Israel, is described as an intercessor even more frequently. During the battle with the Philistines (I Sam. 7:6-9) he “calls on the Lord”. He makes it clear that he intends to continue praying for the people even after they have decided to elect a king in opposition to God’s will, and to do so as a matter of course (I Sam. 12:23). He prays all night long for King Saul but is unable to save him from disaster (15:11).

3. Elijah and Elisha: Prophets as Intercessors

“There came to Bethel at Yahweh’s command a man of god from Judah, just as Jeroboam was standing by the altar to offer the sacrifice, and at Yahweh’s command this man denounced the altar.. .” (I Kings 13:1-2). The men of God who were sent to safeguard the exclusive worship of Yahweh also had authority to present their intercessions to God. In a sense God had entrusted the honour of his own name to their struggle for purity of faith. In his name they are able to perform miracles. But that meant that God could not turn a deaf ear to their intercessions. The story of the man of God from

Judah is typical. At the very moment that King Jeroboam seeks to oppose the prophet, the king's hand is withered. He asks to be healed: "I beg you to placate Yahweh your God and pray for me and so restore me the use of my hand" (I Kings 13:6). In the answering of the prophet's prayer, the mighty hand of God is manifested.

It is along these lines that we are to understand the narratives of Elijah and Elisha. Their intercession is rooted in their devotion to Yahweh. They have no control over the divine intervention, of course. But it is as if their devotion gives them the right to call on Yahweh to demonstrate his power. Elijah announces a great drought (17:1). His intercession secures food for the widow of Zarephath (17:14); above all, it brings her son back to life (17:21). Elijah provides the proof that Yahweh alone deserves to be worshipped by asking him to cause fire to rain down from heaven: "Answer me, Yahweh, answer me, so that this people may know that you, Yahweh, are God..." (18:37). By his prayer he brings the drought to an end (18:41-46).

Elisha also heals a dead child by his intercession (II Kings 4:33). His intervention in the struggle against the superior forces of the Syrians is particularly significant. He prays that his despondent servant might be shown the invisible heavenly army which fights on Israel's side. He then leads the opposing army astray and in this way wards off the danger (II Kings 6).

4. Amos and Jeremiah

In the case of Elijah and Elisha, the primary purpose of intercession is to demonstrate the power of Yahweh. In the case of the later prophets, intercession is linked with divine judgement. The outstanding examples here are Amos and Jeremiah. They see the disaster which the people has brought upon itself coming nearer. Their task is to announce this. But they also consider it their obvious duty at the same time to intercede with God on behalf of the people. This causes them a deep inner tension. Judgement is inescapable. How dare they weaken it by the intercession everyone expects of them? On the other hand, they are themselves members of this

people. Its misfortunes trouble them. What else can they do but turn to God and pray that judgement be stayed? They are torn between the desire to carry out their mission faithfully and the constraint to oppose judgement by pleading their people's cause. The fact that in the case of many prophets no reference is made to intercession at all is probably to be explained by the fact that their commission to intercede had to take second place to the faithful proclamation of their message rather than by the lack of any such commission. For example, in Isaiah there is only a hint of intercessory resistance in the question: "Until when, Lord?" (Isa.6:11).

Amos remonstrates with Yahweh the moment he is shown the approaching disaster. His intercession is clearly prompted by this occasion. He turns advocate because God confronts him with this imminent threat in visions:

This is what the Lord Yahweh showed me: it was a swarm of locusts at the time when the second crop was beginning to grow, a swarm of full-grown locusts, when the king's cutting was over. They were about to devour all the greenstuff in the land, but I said, "Lord Yahweh, forgive I beg you. How can Jacob survive, being so small?" And Yahweh relented, "This shall not happen," said Yahweh.

This is what the Lord Yahweh showed me: the Lord Yahweh himself summoning fire in punishment; it had devoured the great Abyss and it was already encroaching on the land. Then I said, "Stop, Lord Yahweh, I beg you. How can Jacob survive, being so small?" And Yahweh relented. "This will not happen either," said the Lord Yahweh. (Amos 7:1-6)

Twice Amos manages to prevail on God to stay his hand and so wards off disaster. He argues successfully that the monarchy, for all its apparent strength and firmness, is basically weak and frail. But God's wrath cannot in the end be stayed. In a third vision he allows Amos to see the disaster. This time the prophet registers no objection. He recognizes that this time the judgement cannot be turned aside. All he can now do is to announce the disaster.

The tension between the two prophetic roles is even more obvious in the case of Jeremiah. That God's verdict has been pronounced is clear from the very moment of the prophet's call (1:16). The prophet is summoned to "stand up and tell them all I (Yahweh) command you" (1:17). In doing so he will make enemies. His life will be in danger. He is left no room to hope that God may change his mind. The only guarantee the prophet has is that God will be with him to save him. Yet Jeremiah sees it as his duty to intercede for the people. Even the king and the leaders of the people look hopefully to the prophet's intercession: the very fact that he is shown to be right makes him appear in the end to be the one most capable of influencing Yahweh's decision (37:3, cf. also Isa. 37:1-6). But God refuses to admit the prophet's prayer. He explains to Jeremiah that his intervention is pointless. "You for your part must not intercede for this people, nor raise either plea or prayer on their behalf; do not plead with me, for I will not listen to you" (Jer. 7:16; and similarly in 11:14).

The tension comes out very vividly in Yahweh's message to Jeremiah at the time of the great drought. First there is a brief description of the disaster which has already overtaken the people. Then follows the urgent prayer of the people to be spared, a prayer which was certainly composed by the prophet and not by the people. Jeremiah says what he believes the people should say, the prayer he wants them to pray:

If our crimes are witness against us,
then Yahweh, for your name's sake, act!
Yes, our apostasies have been many,
we have sinned against you!
Yahweh, hope of Israel,
its saviour in time of distress,
why are you like a stranger in this land,
like a traveller who stays only for a night?
Why are you like someone bemused,
like a warrior who has no power to rescue?
Yet, Yahweh, you are in our midst,
we are called by your name.
Do not desert us! (Jer. 14:7-9)

God does not answer this prayer. "Yahweh accepts them (the people) no longer" (14:10). Indeed, He does not even want Jeremiah to pray for them. But the prophet refuses to be put off. He points out that other prophets tell the people more comforting news. Yahweh at once brands such prophecies as lies and announces that the prophets themselves are doomed to perish with the people in this same disaster. The genuine prophet can do no other than proclaim God's irrevocable verdict. Jeremiah once again presents a prayer of the people for pardon:

Have you rejected Judah altogether? Does your very soul revolt at Zion? Why have you struck us down without hope of cure? We were hoping for peace - no good came of it! For the moment of cure - nothing but terror! Yahweh, we do confess our wickedness and our fathers' guilt: we have indeed sinned against you. For your name's sake do not reject us, do not dishonour the throne of your glory. Remember us; do not break your covenant with us. Can any of the pagan Nothings make it rain? Can the heavens produce showers? No, it is you, Yahweh. O our God, you are our hope, since it is you who do all this (14:19-22).

But God refuses to allow Jeremiah to bring this prayer before him. His "No!" becomes even stronger. "Even if Moses and Samuel were standing in my presence I could not warm to this people! Drive them out of my sight; away with them!" (15:1).

But Jeremiah does not desist from intercession even for a moment. Even enemies and persecutors are included (18:20). Not surprisingly, therefore, Jeremiah remained fresh in the memory of the people as one of the great intercessors (2 Macc. 15:12-16). He identifies himself with the nation which has already brought disaster on itself. But he learns by bitter experience that his solidarity is of no avail. He learns that in face of the divine decision of judgement, to intercede for mercy and to announce deliverance have become marks of the false prophet. All that the genuine prophet can now do is to

frankly recognize and proclaim the coming judgement. In the interests of this mission, intercession must be changed into a curse (15:15). But Jeremiah rejects the temptation to dissociate himself from the people. He shares its lot and continues to pray for its salvation (42:1-4). The very fact that he is unable to rescue his people makes all the clearer the measure of his solidarity with it.

Ezekiel also recognizes intercession as part of his prophetic mission. "I fell face downwards and exclaimed: 'Ah, Lord Yahweh, are you going to annihilate all that is left of Israel as you turn your anger on Jerusalem?' " (Ezek. 9:8; cf. 11:13)! One of the characteristics of the false prophets is that they "never ventured into the breach" and "never bothered to fortify the House of Israel, to hold fast in battle on the day of Yahweh" (Ezek. 13:5).

5. *Job*

The story of Job has a special place in this survey. It has two important aspects.

Job is put to the test by God. He is overtaken by misfortune and loses everything which had earned him the respect of his fellows and his own self-respect. Three wise friends talk to him and try to persuade him to accept this as due chastisement. Job is unable to accept this reading of his situation. He demands an answer from God. From amid all the evidences of his chastisement he turns towards God himself. He knows that a different explanation awaits him there. He sets his hope on the angel of the Lord. In a sense, God himself is his advocate.

O earth, cover not thou my blood, and let my cry have no resting place. Even now, behold my witness is in heaven, and he that voucheth for me is on high. My friends scorn me: but mine eye poureth out tears unto God; that he would maintain the right of a man with God, and of a son of man with his neighbour (Job.16:19-21 RV).

But I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand up at the last upon the earth: and after my skin hath been thus destroyed, yet from my flesh shall I see God, whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another. (19:25-27 RV).

Job is appealing, so to speak, from God to God; indeed seeking God himself as his advocate. Where nobody else pleads for him, where all he gets is well-meaning advice, only God himself remains to be his advocate.

Job is vindicated. The living God himself deals graciously with him. Job sees him with his own eyes. Correct as many of the reflections of Job's three friends may have been, they are shown up as false in the light of this more radical encounter between God and Job. Job has been proved the just man. He in turn, therefore, can now offer intercessions for his friends. The narrative framework of the poem describes Job as a man of God who, having been put to the test, is now given special authority by God.

So now find seven bullocks and seven rams, and take them back with you to my servant Job and offer a holocaust for yourselves, while Job my servant offers prayers for you. I will listen to him with favour and excuse your folly in not speaking of me properly, as my servant Job has done (42:8).

6. *Priests*

How far was intercession part of the function of the priest? Surprising though it may be, the answer is that in the Old Testament there is very little to suggest that priests offered intercessions for the people. From the functions which the priest had to carry out, personal intercession in prayer to God seems not to have followed as a matter of course. Priests were teachers whose business it was to pass on the tradition. They served at the altar and offered sacrifices. They were familiar with God's requirements and will. They knew the traditional rituals. They were distinct from the prophets. "The prophet spoke out of individual, direct personal experience; the priest out of the stored wisdom and collective experience of his class.

The great personalities are to be sought among the prophets; the living force in times of crisis is theirs; but the maintenance of a permanent ethical and religious tradition was the task of the priests”.² It is not surprising, then, that the priests did not practise intercession in the way the prophets did. Only in post-exilic times, following the disappearance of the prophetic movement, do we hear of priests also being intercessors. We read, for example, in Joel: “Between vestibule and altar, let the priests, the ministers of Yahweh, lament. Let them say, ‘Spare your people, Yahweh! Do not make of your heritage a thing of shame, a byword for the nations. Why should it be said among the nations, Where is their God?’ ” (Joel 2:17).

But there is more to be said about the significance of the priests as intercessors with God. Two points are particularly important.

a) Firstly, Moses and Aaron, the great intercessors, are presented in many Old Testament narratives as fulfilling priestly functions. They are presented as the original models of priestly ministry. In the case of these two figures, at least, the union of intercession and priestly ministry remained a living tradition in Israel. In a late passage, it is stated explicitly: “Moses and Aaron among his priests, and Samuel among them that call upon his name: they called upon the Lord, and he answered them” (Ps. 99:6 KJV).

The combination of the two functions appears quite clearly in the story of the dispute with Korah and his supporters (Num. 16). The authority of Moses and Aaron is challenged by a large group of leading people. Moses meets their challenge by insisting that God should decide between them. He tells them to burn incense with him before Yahweh and to leave it to Yahweh to choose between their offerings. Anxious as Moses and Aaron are to see a dramatic display of divine judgement, they are also concerned for the people:

Yahweh spoke to Moses and Aaron. He said, “Stand apart from this assembly. I am going to destroy them here and now.” They threw themselves face down-

²George Buchanan Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament, Its Theory and Practice*. Ktav Publishing House, New York, 1971 (original edition 1925), p. 223f.

wards on the ground and cried out, “O God, God of the spirits that give life to every living thing, will you be angry with the whole community for one man’s sin?” (Num. 16:20-22)

Korah and his company are swallowed up by the earth. But the people once again rebel against Moses and Aaron, and Yahweh returns to his original purpose to destroy it. The intercession of Moses and Aaron takes a different form this time. Aaron pleads with God as a priest:

They threw themselves face downwards on the ground. Then Moses said to Aaron, “Take the censer and fill it with fire from the altar, put incense in it and hurry to the community to perform the rite of atonement over them. The wrath has come down from Yahweh and the plague has begun.” Aaron did as Moses had said and ran among the assembly, but the plague was already at work among them. He put in the incense and performed the rite of atonement over the people (Num. 16:46-47).

b) Even more important is the fact that every sacrifice includes an element of prayer and intercession. The meaning and purpose of sacrifices vary. This is not the place to list and classify the different sacrifices mentioned in the Old Testament.³ Initially they are simply gifts to honour God and to obtain his blessing. They are offered in order to remove anything which could disturb the relationship between God and his people. Their purpose is to assuage God’s anger and to deflect his punishments. Like intercessions, they seek to influence God’s will in the people’s favour. Some sacrifices seem to suggest a ritual act of intercession.

Take, for example, the prescriptions (probably very ancient) governing the discovery of the body of someone slain by an unknown assailant. The elders of the nearest town are to kill a heifer and say: “Our hands did not shed this blood and our eyes saw nothing. Cover your people Israel whom you have redeemed, Yahweh, and let no innocent blood be

³Cf. G. B. Gray, *op cit.* and Roland de Vaux, *Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice*. Cardiff, 1964.

shed among your people Israel” (Deut. 21:1-9). The guilt, objectively represented by the shed blood, is to be wiped out by this sacrifice.

Sacrifices can have an expiatory effect. This purpose is especially to the fore in two groups of sacrifices: the sin-offering (*hatta'at*) and the sacrifice of reparation (*asam*). These are described in detail in Leviticus (Lev. 4-5; 6:17-7:10; 10:16-20; 5:14-16 and 7:1-6). These sacrifices may have originated in pre-exilic times but they certainly played no vital role in that early period. They acquired importance only in post-exilic times. The sin-offering is a feature of the great Day of Atonement, one of the most important Israelite festivals (Lev. 16). The procedure for atonement here should be noted. Aaron is first of all instructed to offer a sacrifice as atonement for himself and his family. He is then to draw lots for two goats, one of which is slaughtered and its blood used to purify the sanctuary. Aaron brings the second goat, lays both hands on its head and confesses all the sins of the children of Israel, “all their transgressions and all their sins”. It is then led out by a man assigned to this duty, and sent off into the desert. “And the goat will bear all their faults away with it into a desert place” (16:22).

The affinity between intercession and sacrifice comes out especially clearly here. The purpose of sacrifice, as well as of intercession, is to restore access to God by the removal of transgression and sin. Too much should not be read into the ritual, of course. The priest plays no decisive part in this process. The atoning effect lies in the action itself. Only by carrying it out faithfully is the priest an intercessor. Even the idea of substitutionary atonement is scarcely present. The “scapegoat” does not in fact suffer God’s judgement in the place of the people. It is not sacrificed. It has been made unclean by the sins transferred to it and must therefore be driven away. The sins of the people are removed from God’s sight by the departure of the animal into the desert.

But the personal role of the priest and the idea of substitutionary atonement would come to the forefront the more the prophetic office retired into the background and then disappeared and the more the practice of sacrifice was spiritualized

and internalized. As a result of these two developments, the affinity between intercession and priestly ministry is strengthened and begins to come more clearly into view.⁴

7. Intercession by the King - Intercession for the King

Finally, having mentioned the men of God, the prophets and priests, we turn to the kings. They, too, offer intercessions. The king represents the people before God. Israel made no distinction between “things spiritual” and “things temporal”, between a spiritual realm and a temporal realm. The king is God’s anointed. In a sense he continues the function of Moses. His political and priestly tasks are closely interconnected. He appears before God in order to pray for the people.

The first prayer we must mention here is found in the story of David’s census and its consequences. To consolidate his rule over the people, David orders a census. Yahweh therefore causes a plague to break out in Israel. David turns to the angel of Yahweh who is busy wreaking havoc among the people and says: “It was I who sinned, I who did this wicked thing. But these, this flock, what have they done? Let your hand lie heavy on me, then, and on my family!” (II Sam. 24:17).

The king’s priestly action here is connected with specific events.⁵ Elsewhere it is more institutional in character. God had given a special promise to David and his family. “Your house and your sovereignty will always stand secure before me and your throne be established for ever” (II Sam. 7:16). On the strength of this promise, David turns to God and prays that it may be fulfilled in himself and in his successors. “Yes, Lord Yahweh, you are God indeed, your words are true and you have made this fair promise to your servant. Be pleased, then, to bless the house of your servant, that it may continue for ever in your presence; for you, Lord Yahweh, have spoken; and with your blessing the house of your servant will be for ever blessed” (II Sam. 7:28f).

⁴Intercession and sacrifice are very closely associated in the narrative in II Macc. 12:42-45. Judas Maccabeus offers a sacrifice for the slain in battle. The expression “to pray for the dead” (v. 44) and the “offering” of an atonement sacrifice” (v. 45) are used as equivalents.

⁵Another example is found in Hezekiah’s intercession in II Chron. 30:18.

Of special importance here is the building of the Temple. The king does not regard himself simply as the builder and protector of the Temple. He fulfils priestly functions. Solomon plays a central role at the dedication of the Temple. "The king... blessed the whole assembly" and offered a long prayer to God on behalf of the people (I Kings 8, 14ff.). He appeals to the promise to David, his father. He prays that God will manifest his presence at all times in the Temple.

The pre-exilic role of the king is fulfilled in post-exilic times by the High Priest. Even in pre-exilic times, of course, there were priests superior in rank to other priests but it was only in post-exilic times that the office of the High Priest acquired its special character. Ideas linked with the king in pre-exilic times were transferred to the High Priest.

He is the anointed (cf. Ex. 29:7; Lev. 8:12). His office combined royal and priestly functions. He also appears more and more as the people's intercessor before God. As we shall see, the figure of the High Priest will have a role of great importance for the New Testament understanding of intercession.

Kings interceded for the people. But far more frequent in the Old Testament are the occasions when prayers are offered for the king. There is an intimate connection between the welfare of the king and the welfare of the people. In a certain sense, therefore, prayer for the king is prayer for God's blessing on the whole people. A series of psalms has come down to us which were obviously prayers for specific occasions. "Let the king live on and on, prolong his years, generation on generation. May he sit enthroned in God's presence for ever! Assign your love and faithfulness to guard him!" (Ps. 61:7-8; cf. also Ps. 20, a prayer for the king's victory, Ps. 28:8, a prayer for God's help for the people and its anointed king, and Ps. 84:10). How significant the king is for the people comes out very clearly in Ps. 72 where the psalmist prays that the king may judge justly: "that he may rule your people rightly and your poor with justice ... He will have pity on the poor and feeble, and save the lives of those in need; he will redeem their lives from exploitation and outrage, their lives will be precious in his sight. Long may he live, may gold from Sheba be given him! Prayer will be offered for him constantly, blessing in-

voked on him all day long” (Ps. 72:13-15). Certain psalms refer back explicitly to the promises made to David (Ps. 89 and Ps. 132).

Intercessions sometimes are made for Jerusalem with, in particular, a plea that God would build up again the walls of Jerusalem (Ps. 122:6-9; Ps. 51:20; cf. Isa. 62:6-9; Zach. 1:12).

8. *Angels*

Certain passages in the Old Testament refer to the angels as intercessors with God on behalf of human beings. This idea underlies the remark of one of Job’s friends: “Make your appeal then. Will you find an answer? To which of the *Holy Ones* will you turn?” (Job 5:1).

But angels are above all spokesmen for the dying. “When his soul is drawing near to the pit, and his life to the dwelling of the dead, then there is an angel by his side, a Mediator, chosen out of thousands, to remind a man where his duty lies, to take pity on him and to say, ‘Release him from descent into the pit, for I have found a ransom for his life’; his flesh recovers the bloom of its youth, he lives again as he did when he was young...” (Job 33:23-25).

Angels withstand Satan, the adversary and accuser of humanity. They are advocates in heaven who plead the case of the accused by appealing to the divine promise. Zecharia in a vision sees the High Priest Joshua standing before the angel of the Lord:

The angel of Yahweh said to Satan, “May Yahweh rebuke you, Satan, may Yahweh rebuke you, he who has made Jerusalem his very own. Is not this man a brand snatched from the fire?” Now Joshua was dressed in dirty clothes as he stood before the angel of Yahweh. The angel said these words to those who stood before him. “Take off his dirty clothes and clothe him in splendid robes of state, and put a clean turban on his head...” and said to him, “Look, I have taken away your iniquity from you” and clothed him in splendid robes of state and put a clean turban on his head!” (Zech. 3:2-5).

Although angels are only rarely represented in the Old Testament as intercessors, the references in later Jewish literature are more frequent. Here again the idea that a mediator is necessary for effective intercession appears. The angels have the special authority required to intervene with God on behalf of the human being entrusted to their care.

A few examples: "I am Raphael, one of the seven angels who stand ever ready to enter the presence of the glory of the Lord with the prayers of the saints" (Tobit 12:15). Or again, "And he said to me; now, even now, Michael, the overseer of the angels comes down to receive the prayers of humanity" (III Baruch 11:14). Or, "I swear to you, that the angels in heaven remember you at all times before the glory of the one Great One and that your names are written down before the glory of the Great One" (I Enoch, 104,1).⁶

Even the just who have died, especially the great intercessors of Israel such as Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah, can intercede for human beings (Enoch 39:5; 97:3-6; Philo *de exercr.* par. 9).

9. *Some Conclusions*

What then can be said about intercession in the Old Testament? The following four comments may help us to answer this question:

a) Many intercessors are presented to us as people who are able to move God. Their intercession is understood as a power that can heal, rescue and punish. It can secure blessing, avert judgement, persuade God to intervene with miraculous deeds. In some cases it has almost "magic" potency and seems barely distinguishable from an incantation. Intercession is efficacious only with certain people. They do not have this quality however, because they have achieved access to God by religious exercises of any kind. Efficacy is not the fruit

⁶Other passages: Testament of Levi 3:5; Testament of Dan 6:2; I Enoch 40:6; 47:2, Life of Adam and Eve 9:3; Apocalypse of Moses 35:2; II Macc. 15:12-16; III Macc.6:18; Assumption of Moses 12:1-6.

of secret religious rites. In almost every case, on the contrary, it is dependent on God's special choice and call. Intercession is therefore always connected with the demonstration of God's glory. The intercessors do not draw attention to themselves and their extraordinary gifts; on the contrary, by their intercession they give God the opportunity to demonstrate his power among human beings. The purpose of intercession is that God should receive the worship due to him.

b) Intercession is intimately related to the calling of Israel as God's people. The intercessors consider themselves servants of the living God who has promised to be gracious to his people. They therefore pray that his promise should be fulfilled, the obstacles to this cleared out of the way, and that God should continue to be faithful to his people despite all its faithlessness and disobedience. They come before God as champions of a people which has piled up sins and is in desperate straits and threatened with destruction. The focus of all their prayers is the divine promise. The prayers vary in their form and expression. But the ultimate object of them all is to "take God at his own word". What would remain of his promise if He were to abandon his people? It would mean the abandonment of his own action. Indeed, it would mean that everything He has so far done has been futile. He would become a laughing stock among the heathen. This is obviously a very audacious argument. The only allowable defence of it is confidence that the word once spoken by God stands firm. He cannot contradict himself. Their own calling makes the intercessors all the surer of Israel's calling. Themselves taken up into God's purpose in so personal a way, they are free to remind him boldly of his own promise.

c) But can the whole guilt of the people be set aside by intercession? God's promise to the people is not unconditional. It presupposes its obedient response. If the people go their own way, the divine wrath is inescapable; indeed the more God's grace and love have been disappointed in this way, the more inescapable his wrath becomes. Certainly the intercessors can turn to him. They can appeal to his justice by reminding him that just individuals are to be found among the many unjust ones and that He cannot let these just ones perish along with

the rest. But it is impossible to ignore the tension between God's consistency, his faithfulness to himself, and on the other hand his justice. God is right to be angry. His wrath can only be turned aside if atonement is made for what has provoked it. Early passages suggest that intercession as such can restore God's favour. The understanding and attitude of the people play hardly any part. We recall Abraham's prayer for Abimelech. The whole emphasis of the narrative is on the effectiveness of the intercession. Another picture is given in later passages. Intercession is presented increasingly as requiring repentance. Sin must be confessed and expiated. The people must return to God's ways. If God is to be true to himself, He must adhere not only to his promise but also to the conditions attached to it. The role of intercessors is therefore twofold. They appear before God as representatives of the people but also and equally before the people as God's representatives summoning it to repent. There can be a conflict between the two roles. Intercession can be thwarted by the attitude of the people, and even made utterly meaningless so that God refuses to listen to it any longer.

d) From what has already been said, intercession, by its very nature, obviously entails suffering. The intercessors identify themselves with an alien cause. They wrestle with God. By their very calling they are condemned to a lonely role. Above all, they suffer because they know they are one with the people. While it is true that intercessors are spoken of in some passages as persons who stand above the people, later passages make it very clear that they know themselves to be members of Israel and, as such, included in the divine judgement on this people. Moses even goes so far as to assert his readiness to suffer annihilation along with his people. The prophetic intercessors suffer because they have been entrusted with knowledge they can share with the people only to a limited extent. They suffer because they are often misunderstood and sometimes even persecuted. They suffer because they are unable by their intercession to change God's verdict of condemnation.

10. *The Suffering Servant of God*

The reference to suffering in the last paragraph brings us close to the Old Testament figure in which the deepest understanding of intercession finds expression: the suffering servant of God.

And yet ours were the sufferings he bore,
ours the sorrows he carried.
But we, we thought of him as someone punished,
struck by God and brought low.
Yet he was pierced through for our faults,
crushed for our sins.
On him lies a punishment that brings us peace,
And through his wounds we are healed...
Hence I will grant whole hordes for his tribute,
he shall divide the spoil with the mighty,
for surrendering himself to death
and letting himself be taken for a sinner,
while he was bearing the faults of many
and *praying all the time for sinners* (Isa. 53:4-5, 12).

Everything the Old Testament has to say about intercession and intercessors is crystallized, so to speak, in this figure of the suffering servant. Even the dimension of sacrifice finds expression in this text. The suffering servant of God fulfils the mission of the intercessor right to the very end. He not only shares the judgement pronounced by God on the people, he actually takes it upon himself. He makes the necessary atonement in the people's stead. Atoning intercession and atoning sacrifice are united in the suffering servant. He is the prophet who makes intercession; he is the priest who offers the atoning sacrifice; and, by giving himself, he is also the sacrifice which is offered up.⁷

God accepts this intercession. "He shall divide the spoil with the mighty". The union of intercession and sacrifice

⁷Cf. Nils Johannson, *Parakletai - Vorstellungen von Fürsprechers für die Menschen vor Gott in der alttestamentlichen Religion, im Spätjudentum und im Urchristentum* (Parakletai - the Intercessor with God on behalf of Human Beings, Ideas presented in Old Testament Religion, Late Judaism and Early Christianity), Lund, 1940.

leads beyond the in-itself inescapable tension between God's faithfulness and justice. For the sacrifice of the suffering servant satisfies God's justice. Voluntarily accepted suffering opens the way to the future.

IV. JESUS CHRIST - ADVOCATE WITH THE FATHER

The approach to intercession in the New Testament can only be understood against the background of the Old Testament. Of course, the basis and substance of all that is said is now Jesus Christ: his life, death, rule at the Father's right hand, presence in the Church in the power of the Holy Spirit. He was an intercessor in the first place in his life and death. But his pleading does not stop there. He continues to pray for us. He is not just one more link in the chain of intercessors presented in the Old Testament. He is *the* intercessor.⁸ Concepts and ideas on intervention and intercession which had been developed in the history of Israel are now used to express the abiding significance of Jesus Christ for communion with the Father.

He intercedes for us at the Father's right hand (Rom. 8:34). He is "priest for ever" (Hebrews). Just as in his earthly life He accompanied his disciples with intercession on their behalf, so today He accompanies us with his intercession. Let us look more closely at the various aspects of his intercession.

1. *The Intercession of Jesus on Earth*

The picture of Jesus presented in the gospels is of a life sustained by prayer. His approach to people had its source in

⁸In the New Testament as in the Old, we achieve a clear picture of intercession only if we begin by considering the intercessor. The New Testament never speaks of intercession as a special category of prayer. It is significant that the New Testament has no special term for "intercession" and "interceding". The words for "praying" and "asking" acquire the sense of intercession only by the addition of prepositions with the meaning "for".

prayer. The immediate expression of the love which is characteristic of his life is not activity. This love is first wrestled for and prepared in prayer. The maturity of his words and actions derives from his fellowship with God.

Periods of solitude and prayer regularly punctuate his public ministry (Luke 6:12; Matt. 14:23). At these times He seeks fellowship with the Father. He subordinates himself to his will and identifies himself anew with the mission God has entrusted to him. He goes forth from prayer and intercession to be with his fellow men and women. His proclamation of the Gospel is preceded by prayer. When He forgives and heals, the preparation has always been prayer. When He calls his disciples, prayer is the presupposition (Luke 6:2).

His intercession is especially concerned with the disciples. It is an essential dimension of the fellowship which binds him to them. From the moment they are called and throughout their life, He accompanies them; indeed, in a sense, He embraces them even before He makes them his disciples. When He meets Nathaniel and Philip and calls them, He seems already to have known them for a long time (John 1:45-51). He sends them out to proclaim the message of the kingdom of God. As they fulfil their mission at a distance from him, He stands behind them. How closely he was united with them during this mission becomes clear from the jubilant prayer He utters on their return: "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes..." (Luke 10:21). By his intercession He upholds the faith which constantly threatens to evaporate in storms and tempests.

This is vividly illustrated by the story of the crossing of the lake. Jesus remains alone on the hillside to pray; at his bidding, the disciples go on ahead in the boat. In the storm they begin to lose confidence. Jesus appears to them and by his visible presence restores their confidence, which ought not to have wavered simply because they could no longer see him (Mark 6:45-52). He prays that their faith may be upheld in all the testing times they experience as they fulfil their mission. "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that

your faith may not fail” (Luke 22:31f.). He prays for them, indeed tells them that they should trust his intercession and not their own strength (Matt. 14:28ff.; Luke 22:32ff.). He even continues to pray for them when they let him down. The fellowship is not ended: He continues with them even when they are betraying him.

But his intercession is not concerned with the disciples only, but with the whole people. He prays for their deliverance. He prays that they may know the things that make for their peace (Luke 19:42). He continues to pray for their salvation even when they reject him. As happened with the prophets, his intercession turns to lamentation. He, too, suffers because He is unable by his proclamation to turn aside the judgement towards which his people are rushing. “Do not weep for me but weep for yourselves and for your children” (Luke 23:28).

In the garden of Gethsemane He remains behind alone to pray. He is crucified. His disciples have abandoned him. His people have rejected him. But still He continues to intercede, indeed, his intercession takes on a wider scope. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). In this prayer He includes not only those beside him, not only his fair-weather friends, not only the people and all who were unwitting accomplices in his execution, but also those, Jews and Romans, who were directly responsible for it.

2. He Who Pleads For Us

It comes as no surprise to find the apostolic community confessing Jesus Christ as the Advocate who keeps open access to God’s love. The New Testament expresses this idea in a variety of ways.

Paul speaks of Jesus Christ “who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us” (Rom. 8:34). After laying down his life, Jesus is raised up and exalted by God. Jesus’ death on the cross is, in a real sense, an act of intercession. Jesus carries his intercession for us right through to the end, to its fulfilment, without sparing himself. God accepts this plea: anyone who calls on him in the name of Jesus will be saved. In union with

him, even those who were involved in his death can appear before God. His advocacy at God's right hand is the open gateway to God's love. In our own strength none of us can appear before God. No one who presents him or herself before God in union with *him* will be turned away. "Will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?" (Rom. 8:32f.).

"He who pleads for us". Does this not suggest that there is a contradiction between God the Father and Jesus Christ our Advocate? Does it not suggest that God is angry and that his judgement on sin is only deflected by the love of Christ? On the contrary, it means that God's love shines through wrath and judgement. Jesus the Son of God represents God's love on earth. In accordance with the will of his Father He offers his life in sacrifice. Hence Paul can say that the initiative in the sacrifice of Jesus lay with God the Father: "He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32). In agreement with his Father's will, Jesus takes on himself everything which can separate human beings from the love of God. His act of intercession, far from contradicting God, actually underlines God's grace and is an expression of God's love. Because Jesus, after this act of intercession, sits at the Father's right hand and intercedes for us, we can be certain that "nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:39).

We find this same idea expressed in another way in I John. "My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." Even if we cannot be certain about the precise significance of the term "advocate" (*parakletos*), it is clear that the "advocate with the Father" is able to stay the execution of judgement on our sins. He who has become the sacrifice for the sins of the rest can plead with the Father for the Church, indeed for the whole world. The sacrifice of his life is not just something in the past. In its purity and completeness it is so unique that it changes our relationship to God. The risen and ascended Jesus Christ is the heart of the Church. He is the

foundation of its faith and life. He brings believers before God with their constantly repeated weaknesses and failures. By his intercession He upholds them and enables them to share afresh in his mission. In him it is impossible for them to continue in sin. But his intercession has effects which extend far beyond the boundaries of the Christian community. The sacrifice offered by him is effective not only for those who believe but also for the "whole world". Whether it yet realizes this or not, it, too, is affected by his intercession with the Father. No human being, no aspect of human history, no part of creation lies outside the love of God. The "advocate with the Father" is constantly at work leading the creation into fellowship with God. The Christian community must see the world in this light: not as an alien realm ultimately condemned to outer darkness, but as a realm already claimed by Christ's intercession.

3. Priest For Ever

The idea of continued intercession is developed in the New Testament in yet a third form. It is one of the main themes of the "Letter to the Hebrews". By his obedience on earth, by his sacrifice on the cross, and by his exaltation, Jesus Christ has become the High Priest who enters the heavenly sanctuary and achieves final and eternal salvation. "For Christ has entered not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb. 9:24). He lives as High Priest for ever; salvation for those who put their trust in him. "Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25).

The High Priest had already become a special object of speculation in late Jewish literature. His role as mediator between the people and God had been increasingly emphasized. Whereas, as we have seen, priests hardly practised intercession at all in earlier centuries, the High Priest was now presented more and more as the advocate of the people. It is he and he alone who enters the Holy of Holies to offer the neces-

sary sacrifice for the people. The significance of the High Priest is heightened to such a degree that he becomes larger than life. When he enters the Holy of Holies he is no longer just a human being; he is without sin. The category of the divine *Logos* is used to describe him (Philo of Alexandria).

The author of Hebrews latches on to such ideas as this. Jesus Christ the Son of God is *the* High Priest. At the same time He is also *the* sacrifice. What the priestly ministries and sacrifices sought to accomplish, He accomplished in a unique and final way. After him, they lose their significance. He intercedes with God on behalf of the community. Before his exaltation to this priestly ministry in heaven, He had become man, in everything except sin, altogether like us. He travelled the road of obedience and suffering. He therefore knows the community. The way it must now travel, he travelled first, before it. He is not a heavenly being, therefore, remote from the present horizon of the community. He is identified with it, bound up with it, and He upholds it by interceding on its behalf.

The total idea is developed in three main stages. The letter describes, first of all, the glory of the person of Christ. He is God's Son who, following the prophets, has now spoken the final word. All authority is now vested in him. He stands above the angels. But for a short while He was humbled, set lower than the angels and, in this humiliation, learned obedience. God then exalted him and made all things subject to him. These two strands are further developed in parallel. Jesus Christ became like us, his brothers and his sisters, in all things. In solidarity with us, he learned the way of mercy. By his exaltation He is far superior to all the great Old Testament figures: above Moses, above Joshua, above the High Priests and their sacrifices. Jesus the Son of God has become *the* High Priest who is able to intercede for his people. He is the High Priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek (Heb.6:20).

The author of Hebrews then proceeds to explain and develop this last phrase "after the order of Melchizedek" (Heb. 7:1 - 10:18). The mysterious figure of Melchizedek, the royal priest who blessed Abraham and, by doing so, clearly revealed his superiority to the father of Israel, is the type of Jesus Christ the "priest for ever". What distinguishes Jesus Christ

from the rest? In every respect He is superior to the priestly ministry of the Old Covenant. Whereas these priests all died, "He holds his priesthood in perpetuity... since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). Whereas the effectiveness of the priestly ministry was limited by the sins of the priest, He is without sin. He brings a new covenant. What existed before him was only the picture of the perfect which has now come. Whereas previously it was necessary to go on offering fresh sacrifices, He offered the one sacrifice which makes all further sacrifices superfluous. He gave his own life, not just a sacrifice but *the* sacrifice which is able to purify us for eternity. The community is sanctified once and for all by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ.

The concluding portion of Hebrews is a summons to discipleship (10:19 - 12:29). The community is to enter "the new and living way...through the curtain" (Heb. 10:20). It lives, just as the great Old Testament figures did, in faithful expectation of the future which has already been secured for it. It purifies and sanctifies itself so as to be able really to grow in this hope. It journeys through this present world towards this future world, with its attention focused on the High Priest who has already taken the way through the curtain and now stands before the Father on its behalf. Along this way, the believers are to practise unity in fellowship and to support one another in love. Reference is twice made to intercession in this context. Firstly, in the exhortation (13:3) to regard those who are in prison as fellow-prisoners and to pray for them as such; and secondly, the author's request to his readers to "pray for" him. The fellowship of love between brothers and sisters in Christ is obviously also a fellowship of mutual intercession.

The boldness of this whole conception may not strike the modern reader immediately, perhaps. This is a radical development of the meaning of Christ's resurrection and sovereignty. The Risen Christ, the one who intercedes with the Father, is the strength, the only strength, which keeps the Church in faith and holds it together. When it commits itself in faith to him, it has no need of the priestly ministry or the

sacrifices of the Old Testament. It is a believing pilgrim people, living by intercession and in intercession.

4. Jesus' Prayer for the Sanctification of the Disciples

For the understanding of intercession, finally, the extended prayer of Jesus for his disciples as preserved for us in the Fourth Gospel (John 17) is especially important. It is usually known as Jesus' "high priestly prayer" but it might more accurately be called his "prophetic intercession".

Like the Old Testament prophets Jesus, too, prays for his disciples. He offers himself and his work to God; at the same time, He offers to God not only the disciples but also all who will come to believe in him through their proclamation of the Gospel. This prayer of Jesus is offered just prior to his arrest. It was, of course, formulated after his death and resurrection and is not a verbatim report but an attempt to interpret the death of Jesus. By giving this prayer, the author of the Fourth Gospel explains why the death of Jesus was not the end of his ministry but marked the beginning of a new era. Jesus knew that He must go to the Father. He knew that the sacrifice of his own life was necessary. Deliberately and voluntarily, therefore, He accepted death. He knew that from now on the disciples must take up his mission and continue it. In offering himself to God, therefore, He also offers them in his intercession, asking that God may glorify himself in their mission. The prayer is a reminder to the Church that it is sent by Christ and that it is by his intercession that the Church is upheld in its mission.

The prayer is in three parts. Jesus first spreads out before God his own work (vv.1-8). Next He intercedes for his disciples (vv. 9-19). Finally He prays for the fellowship of all believers (vv. 20-25). Distinct as they are, these three sections are nevertheless closely interrelated and even interwoven. The dominant theme in each section is always echoed in the others as well.

Jesus spreads out before the Father his own work (vv.1-8). He has glorified the name of God by perfectly fulfilling his will. He will crown his ministry by his death on the cross. But

already He turns to the Father as if the final word from the cross had already been uttered — “It is accomplished!” He asks God to accept and bless the sacrifice of his life. It is important to notice that He regards the fellowship which he has established with his disciples as part of his work. He has declared God’s name to them. He has passed on to them the message which secures them access to the truth. They have known him and, through him, God. They belong inseparably to him. He therefore offers them at the same time as He offers himself, and He prays God to accept them along with him.

Jesus then intercedes for his disciples (vv.9-19) Jesus has sent them into the world: “As thou didst send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (v.8). But in this mission they are henceforward on their own. He can no longer lavish on them his direct instructions. “Hitherto He has covered them as a mother hen covers her chicks with her wings. Now as He parts from them, He prays that God will cover them with his protection” (Calvin). Indeed, he offers himself to the Father in order that He may care for them himself and strengthen them in their mission. “And for their sake I consecrate myself that they also may become consecrated in truth” (v.19). His ultimate purpose in interceding for them is to enable them to accomplish their mission. He therefore prays firstly that they may be one. In fact, the hour was close at hand when they would be scattered and become indistinguishable from the world. God must therefore assemble them as one people. “Holy Father, keep them in thy name which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one” (v.11). He then asks that they may be protected from evil. Their mission is to human beings. They can only fulfil their mission if they really identify themselves with these human beings. He cannot pray that they should be taken out of the world, therefore. Otherwise their task would never be fulfilled. He can only pray that they may be preserved from evil in their words and deeds. The third petition follows. Jesus asks that they may be sanctified in the truth. By this He does not mean that they should be made morally perfect. It means rather that they should become God’s possession already here on earth and remain always his possession. Jesus prays that

God may fill them with his presence and so make them signs of his presence in the world.

Jesus then prays for the fellowship of *all* believers (vv. 20-25). His intercession for the disciples applies equally to those who will succeed them. For they will in fact have the same mission. In this final section, two petitions stand out. Emphatically, indeed more emphatically here than in the prayer for the disciples, Jesus prays that God may hold them together in unity. The essential presupposition for the fulfilment of their mission is unity, genuine fellowship established by God in his name, not just superficial agreement on certain aims and activities. This strong emphasis on unity may have been prompted in part by the experience of division which so soon befell the Church. Already at the moment of its composition, perhaps, this prayer was a summons to unity. Jesus had foreseen the danger of disunity. Already before his death He had prayed that God's love might limit the forces of division. He had already prayed that they might not be defeated by any trial or temptation but enter into glory. "Father, I desire that they also whom thou hast given me may be with me where I am" (v. 24).

The whole prayer seems to orbit exclusively around the disciples and their successors. In one place, Jesus even says in so many words: "I am not praying for the world". But in actual fact the prayer nevertheless has the world as its real horizon. Jesus prays for the disciples for the sake of their mission in the world. His intercession focuses on the disciples and the Church because they are all important for the sake of the world. His intercession, therefore, is at the same time essentially a prayer for the world which God so loved as to give his own unique Son to save it.

V. INTERCESSION IN THE CHURCH

The consideration of Christ has shown the central importance of his intercession for the life of the Church. As with prayer in the widest sense, so with intercession in particular: either is possible only "in him". Intercession offered by individual Christians or even congregations for each other is, so to speak, a priestly act performed in his name. He has established for us access to the Father. He enables us to speak to the Father. He has led us into such intimate fellowship with the Father that his physical presence is no longer required; we are able to go to the Father in his name (John 16:26).

1. Paul - a Priestly Servant of Jesus Christ

It is clear from the New Testament that the disciples play a special part in this fellowship created by Christ. It is as if those whom Christ sent out in a special sense, knew themselves also commissioned in a special sense to pray for one another and for all who would come to believe in him through them. "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you that He might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren" (Luke 22:32). The special responsibility of intercession comes out still more clearly in the letters of Paul. It is not that the apostles step into Christ's place. Their rejection of any such exaggeration of their role is too emphatic to allow for any misunderstanding of this sort. Nor did their special responsibility in any way restrict the priestly office of the congregation. Their intercession is intercession in Christ's name. "In him", they are, so to say, the prototype of what the congregation and every individual member of it is also called to be.

The richest intercessory material is undoubtedly found in the letters of Paul.⁹ Almost all the letters (Galatians is the only exception) begin with intercession for the recipients. But Paul also occasionally adopts the intercessory form or at least makes references to intercession even in the body of his letters. In some letters he returns to the intercessory form at the conclusion.

These numerous intercessions can be explained quite simply in the first place by the apostle's deep attachment to the congregations he had founded. How could he possibly not intercede with God for them! His intercessions evidence his commitment to the Gospel and his love and concern for the congregations.

But his intercession is also affected by his conception of his apostolic mission. He has a special task to carry out as an apostle, a decisively important task in God's plan. He has to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles. "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the Gospel of God..." (Rom. 1:1). For the community to whom he now writes he has become the gateway to the truth and to salvation. He feels a special responsibility for them all, therefore. He can describe his apostolic mission as a priestly ministry. He can speak of the grace which has been bestowed on him "to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 15:16). The priests in Israel performed their service in the Temple, the place where God had permitted his name to dwell and where He therefore allowed prayers to be addressed to him and heard such prayers. Paul's priestly service consists in proclaiming the Gospel. The time has come for God's gracious act and offer of salvation to be carried to the ends of the earth. God's Temple has, so to speak, exploded. As he was present in the Temple, so now he is present where Christ's reconciliation is proclaimed. The apostle's task is to gather God's peo-

⁹Cf. Gordon P. Wiles, *Paul's Intercessory Prayers. The Significance of the Intercessory Prayer Passages in the Letters of Paul*. Society for New Testament Studies, Monograph Series 24, Cambridge, 1974.

ple together. Their faith is the sacrificial offering which he brings as a priest before God.

This priestly service in the form of the proclamation of the Gospel also includes intercession. Paul has brought these people the Gospel. He intercedes for them, for their growth in faith and in fellowship. He prays that his mission may be successful. It is also important, therefore, that the congregations for which he intercedes should accompany him in prayer. They, too, contribute to the fulfilment of God's purpose in history.

The intercessory passages in Paul are too numerous to be presented here fully and we can only refer to some typical themes and characteristics.

a) "I *thank* my God in all my remembrance of you...." (Phil. 1:3). Almost always Paul begins with praise and thanks to God. Before dealing with any other matter, he turns to God and thanks him for the gifts he has already bestowed on the congregations. He thanks him for their election. (I Thess. 1:4), for the grace bestowed on them in Jesus Christ (I Cor. 1:4), for the faith and love they display (II Thess. 1:3; Rom. 1:8; Col. 1:4), for their share in the work of the Gospel (Phil. 1:5), for their constancy in suffering (II Thess. 1:4), for the aid and comfort they have given him in his own sufferings (II Cor. 1:3; Phil. 1:7). To imagine that Paul's purpose in these words of thanks and praise is simply to win the readers' favour would be perverse. Their purpose is much deeper. Paul knows that the congregations are basically not his creation. It is the Spirit who has called them into being and who is now at work in their midst. Though Paul's role in relation to the congregations is an important one, it remains a secondary one. He can only thank God again and again for having poured out his grace on them. Paul and the congregations are held together by this thanksgiving.

b) Thanksgiving is usually followed by *intercession*. Paul prays that the congregations may grow in faith and in every good gift and finally be perfected. God will bring to completion the work already begun. For example, Paul prays that God may count them worthy of their calling and "fulfil every good resolve and work of faith by his power, so that the name

of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him..." (II Thess 1:11f.). Or he can say: "And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ" (Phil. 1:10). The prayer can sometimes take the form of an indicative affirmation: "... (the Lord) who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (I Cor. 1:8-9). What God can and will make of them is always the root idea. Paul prays, therefore, that they may be equipped for their mission and be kept faithful to the last day, through all dangers and temptations.

c) Paul takes *the situation of the congregations* into account in his intercession. Prayers at the opening of the letter always reveal some of the qualities and weaknesses of the particular community to which he is writing as well as some of its special problems. The occasion for the writing of the letter becomes clear and the language used often anticipates the theme Paul wishes to deal with in the letter as a whole. At first reading, of course, the reader will not at once grasp the full significance of each phrase but if after reading the whole letter we turn back to the beginning we discover the extent to which the carefully formulated phrases already encroach on later passages. First Corinthians may well serve as an example of this. Paul immediately introduces the keywords "speech" and knowledge" (I Cor. 1:5) which will play such an important role later in the letter. He emphasizes the need to wait patiently for the Lord to reveal himself (v. 7).

Paul makes use of the exordium to a letter, above all, to explain more precisely his personal relationship to the congregation. In the language of prayer, he shares with them the concerns he feels when thinking of them, his criticisms as well as his joy. He speaks of his hopes and his plans. For example, he tells the Thessalonians that he prays night and day "that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith" (I Thess. 3:10). When he writes to the Romans, Paul makes clear in the prayer at the beginning of the letter *why* he

is writing to them, even though he has hitherto had no contacts with the community in Rome. The letter is to prepare the way for a personal visit: "God is my witness... that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you" (Rom. 1:9-11).

Are these prayers a reflection of Paul's own personal intercession or must they be regarded merely as a stylistic device? Does he use the intercessory form so as to be able to say things it would be hard or impossible to say in direct speech, whether *captationes benevolentiae* or critical questions? It is certainly the case that the form of Paul's prayers is to some extent determined by the demands of the epistolary form he is using. He is not reproducing personal prayers *verbatim*, therefore, but reminding the congregation that he prays for them and indicating the contents of such prayers. But the prayers are not so very remote from real prayers. Prayer retains its primacy over the epistolary form. We should also remember, perhaps, that the letters were read aloud in the congregations. "I adjure you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the brethren" (I Thess. 5:27). In composing them, therefore, Paul certainly kept this liturgical setting in view.

Thanksgiving and supplication constitute the main framework of Paul's intercession. In this framework, Paul makes clear both in his intercessions and in his letter, what he is mainly concerned with in the congregations.

d) Brothers and sisters! *Pray for us!* Paul frequently asks the congregations to pray for him and his mission. Just as he intercedes for them, so they are to intercede for him. Paul knows that he can fulfil his mission only in cooperation with them. The proclamation of the Gospel, begun by him in their midst, has now become their common task, theirs and his. He uses very trenchant language to describe this unity in missionary prayer: "I appeal to you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, *to strive together with me (sunagonisasthai)* in your prayers to God on my behalf, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints ..."

(Rom. 15:30f.). Or again, "...Yes, he will continue to deliver us if you will *cooperate* (*sunupourgounton*) by praying for us. Then, with so many people praying for our deliverance, there will be many to give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favour God has shown towards us" (II Cor. 1:11).

Paul's frequent references to his own situation may also be due, therefore, to his desire to make it possible for the congregations to pray more concretely for him and his ministry. "In saying this, we should like you to know, dear friends..." (II Cor. 1:8). Paul's unmistakable concern is that the fellowship of prayer should be a living thing. The messengers who carried messages between the apostle and the congregations certainly helped in this direction too (Col. 1:8).

In the last analysis, all these exhortations to intercessory prayer serve one single purpose, namely, that the Gospel should be proclaimed. This is most impressively expressed in the following passage: "Persevere in prayer, with mind awake and thankful heart; and include a prayer for us, that God may give us an opening for preaching, to tell the secret of Christ; that indeed is why I am now in prison. Pray that I may make the secret plain, as it is my duty to do" (Col. 4:2-4).

e) The fellowship between Paul and the congregations is a fellowship marked by *suffering for the Gospel*. The apostolic ministry is a ceaseless struggle. Difficulties strew the apostle's way: "Hard pressed on every side..." (II Cor. 4:8). Several of Paul's letters were written from prison. Many of the congregations also have to contend with hostility and opposition. Paul mentions this frequently: "And you, in turn, followed the example set by us and by the Lord; the welcome you gave the message meant grave suffering for you, yet you rejoiced in the Holy Spirit" (I Thess. 1:6).

When Paul intercedes for congregations who suffer persecution or when he asks their prayers for himself "in bonds", deliverance from sufferings is not his primary concern. What concerns him above all is that these sufferings should further the proclamation of the Gospel. He sees these sufferings, too, in the larger setting of thanksgiving and prayer. In a sense, suffering is the seal which confirms God's presence. God's glory can shine forth all the more resplendently in the out-

ward weakness to which his witnesses are condemned. By holding fast in face of all opposition, the witnesses of the Gospel demonstrate that their hope is far greater than anything they can hope for in this world. The Gospel is reflected in their sufferings. Paul thanks God, therefore, for every demonstration of firmness in affliction, and for the testimony thus borne. At the same time, he prays that strength may be given himself and the congregations to be faithful witnesses. He can sometimes pray, it is true, to be delivered from hostile attacks, but even then it is the proclamation of the Gospel that is his first concern. He wants his life to continue so that it may be devoted to his apostolic ministry. At the same time, he has a strong conviction that his life will end in a martyr's death. If this turns out to be the case, "I am glad of it and I share my gladness with you all" (Phil. 2:17).

When afflictions come, the fellowship between the apostle and his congregations must be expressed in a special manner. Suffering is a signal for special intercession and solidarity. Since afflictions are a mark of the apostolic fellowship, they must also be endured together. Paul develops this theme in relation to the congregation in Corinth. His sufferings benefit them. The comfort he finds in suffering is exactly the same comfort which strengthens them in their suffering (II Cor. 1:8-11). Demonstrations of solidarity in times of distress are a source of special encouragement. The note of joy which fills the letter to the Philippians is explained by the way the congregation there had helped Paul in his imprisonment: "It is indeed only right that I should feel like this about you all, because you hold me in such affection, and because, when I lie in prison or appear in the dock to vouch for the truth of the Gospel, you all share in the privilege that is mine" (Phil. 1:7). And their suffering, like his own, is also a grace bestowed by God; he and they are bound together in this grace (Phil. 1:29).

2. The Priesthood of All Believers - the Congregation's Intercession

The intercessory passages in the letters of Paul are all focused on the relations between the apostle and the congregations: he prays for them and they pray for him.

But what has the New Testament to say about the intercession of the congregations for one another? And for the world? This is referred to explicitly in only a few places. In *Acts*, we are told that the first Christian community “met constantly to hear the apostles teach, and to share the common life, to break bread, and to pray” (2:42). We hear how the congregation prayed for Peter and John when they were in prison (4:23-31). The author of I Peter hints at something like mutual intercession when he exhorts his readers to lead an ordered and sober life, given to prayer, and describes the fellowship of the Church as mutual solidarity in suffering: “Awake! Be on the alert! Your enemy the devil, like a roaring lion, prowls around looking for someone to devour. Stand up to him, firm in faith, and remember that your fellow Christians, men and women, are going through the same kinds of suffering while they are in the world...” (I Pet. 5:8f.).

But more important here than these isolated references is the conviction that the whole community is called to priestly service. Christ is *the* priest and *the* victim. Those who live in Christ share his priestly ministry. As we have seen, this applies in the first instance to the apostles. Their proclamation together with their sacrifices for the spread of the Gospel are to be understood as priestly action. But this also applies to the congregation. As its members follow Christ, they become the “royal priesthood”. Serving Christ, they serve one another and, through their words and deeds, they also serve those around them. This includes their intercessions for one another and for the world, even when these are not specifically mentioned.

This priestly ministry is presupposed by Paul when he writes to the Philippians: “But if my life-blood is to crown that sacrifice which is the offering up of your faith, I am glad of it, and I share my gladness with you all” (Phil. 2:17). The same idea underlies the summons to the Christian community in Rome: “Therefore, my brothers (and sisters), I implore you by God’s mercy to offer your very selves to him: a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for his acceptance, the worship offered by mind and heart” (Rom 12:1). The clearest reference, however, is found in I Peter: “Come, and let yourselves be

built, as living stones, into a spiritual temple; become a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (2:5). And a little further on: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, and a people claimed by God for his own, to proclaim the triumphs of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (2:9).

The “priesthood of all believers”! When it is used today, the slogan is usually pressed into the service of the protest against the clericalization of the Church. Every single member of the Church is a priest. Each one has access to God and is therefore free. But before we enter into arguments over the ministry, the congregation and the individual members of the congregation, it is important to remember the original purpose and meaning of the slogan. The priesthood of believers means in the first place that Christians are called to serve God, each other, and the world, as priests. They “are permitted and enabled to share in the continuing high priestly work of Christ by offering themselves in love and obedience to God and in love and service of men”.¹⁰

Intercession is an important part of this service. Taking his cue from I Peter 2:9, Martin Luther formulated this impressively as follows: “In addition, we are priests, and thus greater than mere kings, the reason being that priesthood makes us worthy to stand before God, and to pray for others. For to stand and pray before God’s face is the prerogative of none except priests. Christ redeemed us that we might be able spiritually to act and pray on behalf of one another just as, in fact, a priest acts and prays on behalf of the people... Who can fully conceive the honour and the elevation of Christians? By virtue of their kingship, they exercise authority over all things, and by virtue of their priesthood, they exercise power with God, for God does what they ask and desire. Thus it is written in the book of Psalms: God does the will of those that fear him, and hears their prayers” (Ps. 145:19).¹¹

¹⁰T. W. Manson, *Ministry and Priesthood: Christ’s and Ours*. London, 1958, p. 70.

¹¹“The Freedom of a Christian”, in *Reformation Writings of Martin Luther*, ed. and tr. Bertram Lee Woolf. Lutterworth Press, London, vol. 1, 1952, p. 366.

Intercession is not confined exclusively to prayer. It always seeks expression also in practical concrete forms and signs. One example of this may be mentioned here, the collection made by Paul in the congregations founded by him for the relief of the Jerusalem Church. The collection was, of course, much more than a practical gesture. Its purpose was not only to offer material aid to the “saints” in Jerusalem, but at the same time to express the solidarity of the Pauline congregations with the Jerusalem Church. Paul understood it as a sacrifice, expressive of the personal self-sacrifice which lay behind it (II Cor. 8:5). Its purpose was to sharpen intercession; not simply to meet material needs but also to lead to thankfulness to God (II Cor. 9:2). It was meant to strengthen love between the congregations. The Jerusalem community will “join in prayer on your behalf” and as they do so “their hearts will go out to you because of the richness of the grace which God has imparted to you” (II Cor. 9:14). This was why it was so important that the gift should be accepted by the Jerusalem community. Paul asks them to “pray God for” him “that my errand to Jerusalem may find acceptance with God’s people” (Rom. 15:31). The collection for the “saints” is the fruit of intercession and leads on to further intercession.

Will the priestly prayers be answered? It was the experience of the Old Testament prophets that God sometimes disallowed their prayers. The New Testament clearly reckons with similar limits to the efficacy of intercession in the Church. Without qualifying the truth that Jesus Christ is our advocate and our atoning sacrifice, or the truth that anyone who sins may turn confidently towards him, there is a degree of denial which, so to speak, makes intercession pointless. The author of I John, who speaks so emphatically of pardon, can also say: “If a man sees his brother committing a sin which is not a deadly sin, he should pray to God for him and he will grant him life - that is when men are not guilty of deadly sin. There is such a thing as deadly sin, and I do not suggest that he should pray about that...” (I John 5:16).

But who is capable of distinguishing between sins which are deadly and those which are not? When we try to do so we may find our intercession dying on our lips. Martin Luther himself

testifies to such an experience: “I pray God for a gracious last hour; that he may remove me from hence and spare me the sight of the misery which must surely overtake Germany. For I am persuaded that, if even ten Moses were to rise up and intercede for us, they could not accomplish anything. But I also feel that when I long to pray for my beloved Germany, my prayer rebounds and will not ascend heavenwards as it does when I pray for other blessings”.¹² Despite such experiences, however, the priestly task of intercession remains. It is not for the priestly community itself to determine the limits of intercession. All it can do is to fix its gaze on the advocate with the Father, the propitiation not only for our sins but also for the sins of the whole world.

3. *The Eucharistic Celebration*

As we have already seen, intercession and the celebration of the Eucharist are intimately connected. Little information is provided in the New Testament as to how the Eucharist was actually celebrated. The gospels and the letters of Paul refer to the words of institution. Occasionally there are passages which report that the eucharist was actually celebrated and point out the need to celebrate it worthily. Certain gospel passages may contain references to the way in which the Eucharist was celebrated in the congregations. The account of the feeding of the five thousand provides an example of this. “Then, taking the five loaves and the two fishes, he looked up to heaven, said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples to distribute. He also divided the two fishes among them. They all ate to their hearts’ content” (Mark 6:42). The Fourth Gospel in particular seems to refer frequently to the eucharistic celebration in an indirect way. It is possible that even the “high priestly prayer” is to be read in this context. If so, the connection between intercession and the eucharistic celebration is already to be found within the New Testament itself. Whatever the precise interpretation of

¹²Sermon on keeping children at school, 1530 (WA,30,2) p. 585f. Quoted by Hesse, *Fürbitte im Alten Testament*, p. 53.

these passages, in any case, we know that the oldest known eucharistic prayers certainly included intercession for the Church.

Two such prayers are preserved in the *Didache*. The thanksgiving over the bread continues as follows: “As this broken bread was scattered upon the hills and was gathered together and made one, so let thy Church be gathered together into thy kingdom from the ends of the earth” (*Did.* 9:4).¹³ In the prayer after the celebration we read: “Remember, Lord, thy Church, to deliver her from all evil and to make her perfect in thy love and to gather from the four winds her that is sanctified into thy kingdom which thou didst prepare for her” (*Did.*, 10:5).¹⁴

These prayers pick up and develop what the New Testament has to say about the intercession of Jesus and of Paul. They show that the Eucharist was understood as an act of intercession. At the moment when the Christian community gives thanks to God over the bread and wine, it also remembers the whole Church which God has called in this world and which He is leading to his kingdom. Here once again the great framework of thanksgiving and intercession becomes visible. Thanksgiving precedes petition; thanksgiving leads irresistibly to intercession. The Eucharist is the summary of the Gospel in a visible sign. It is also, therefore, the supreme setting for intercession.

¹³ *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Bettenson, World's Classics, London, Oxford University Press, 1959. p. 90f.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

VI. TWO SPECIAL QUESTIONS

It would seem natural enough for churches to pray for each other even though they continue to be divided. However much our different traditions may prevent complete fellowship between us, there is surely no reason why they should prevent us from praying for one another. And in fact there is a strong conviction that the churches can and should pray for one another, whatever their distinctive convictions and different spiritualities. The experience of fellowship is too strong to permit scruples of principle of any kind to hinder churches from praying together and praying for one another.

But it is important to realize that prayer and intercession are not unaffected by the differences which divide the churches from one another. The differences between our traditions also result in different ways of understanding and practising intercession. We must not underestimate the importance of these differences.

1. The Intercession of Mary and the Saints

In the liturgical life and private prayer and devotion of many churches, a special place is allotted to Mary and the saints. They turn to Mary and the saints and ask them to intercede with God on their behalf. Mary's historical role in the revelation of salvation is not just something belonging to the past. Now as then, she stands in a special relationship of intimacy with her Son who "pleads for us at God's right hand". The service performed by the saints in the proclamation of the Gospel remains important and significant for all times. The Church now on earth is not alone. It is enfolded in the obedience of Mary and the witness of the saints. When the

Church prays, therefore, it will consciously associate itself with their fellowship and pray with them.

Other churches are unable to share this view. They regard this emphasis on Mary and the saints as an encroachment on the unique position of Christ. He taught his disciples to call on God in his name. To add other names to this unique name is bound to obscure this directive. For this reason, the Reformers, Zwingli and Calvin in particular, rejected this idea of intercession through Mary and the saints. The Geneva Confession of 1536 called it superstition.

What are we to make of this conflict? Are these two views as irreconcilable as they appear at first sight? Both positions are concerned with a vital aspect of the Gospel. Each would lose something essential, therefore, by not taking the other into account.

The first point to be made is that the Church of God must pray in the name of Christ. Just as it lives by Christ and in Christ, so too it prays in his name. No other name can stand beside his. Praying means giving his name its full and entire place in the Church and in our personal life. Nothing we say about Mary and the saints must in any way challenge the words "in him". There is some justification for the Reformers' objection. How easily Christ can be pushed into the background! How easily Mary can become an intercessor in her own right! How easily the saints can be assigned a place which diverts attention from Christ! Not only was the objection valid at the time of the Reformation, it must also be heeded today. Take, for example, the founders of new movements in the Church. How easily they become "mediators" between God and human beings! How easily the very variety of such "mediators" becomes a source of division! For the sake of the unity of the Church, as well, the words "in him" must be maintained in their purity and integrity.

On the other hand, we must surely maintain, too, that prayer to God must always be practised in fellowship with the whole company of believers. Prayer "in him" is always also prayer "in the Church". It is sustained by the whole company of believers and not just the visible company of believers at any given time. Every prayer prayed "in him" is one voice

in the chorus of all the prayers that have ever been prayed “in him”. Surely it is natural for the Church, therefore, when it prays, to remember this fellowship? God’s plan and purpose will surely become much clearer to the Church when it keeps in view this inclusive fellowship into which its prayer brings it? Will the Church not remember especially those who have been and continue to be of outstanding importance for the fellowship of believers? Mary who was chosen to become the mother of our Lord? The apostles who preached the Gospel? The saints and, above all, the martyrs who bore witness to his name? To be sure, they have attained this special importance only “in him”. They are signal instances of the overwhelming grace of God. Through Christ and in Christ they have proclaimed the Gospel. They gathered Christian communities and performed a special priestly ministry for them.¹⁵ Why should they not be remembered? Subordinate to Christ though they be, their ministry is surely not at an end. It continues to live in the life of the Church. The Church will continue, then, to offer its prayers and intercessions in fellowship with them. If it were to forget the “cloud of witnesses”, it would easily be tempted to take itself and its immediate problems far too seriously.

These considerations do not, of course, dispose of the conflict between the two standpoints. That conflict can only be resolved by reaching agreement not only on intercession but also on the significance of Mary and the saints as such. The difference in conceptions of intercession has, as it were, a “symbolic” character. It reflects the greater difference in the matter of mariology. This is why it is so deeply rooted in the life of the churches. But, considered independently of this larger question, the commemoration of Mary and the saints in prayer and intercession need not present an insuperable problem. Is not this observation sufficient on itself to make joint mutual intercession possible and to pave the way to a gradual development of a common practice?

¹⁵In a passage on the intercessions of the martyrs, Augustine says: He (Christ) is truly the one intercessor who intercedes for us, just as He is also the one shepherd... Peter, therefore, is a shepherd, not in himself, but in the body of the shepherd (*in corpore pastoris est pastor*) (Migne, PL 38, 1295f.).

2. *Liturgical Intercession for One's Own Church*

In the eucharistic liturgy, many churches pray for their particular hierarchy, in particular for the bishop of the diocese in which the service takes place. In this way they pray for the Church and its unity. As representative of the Church, the bishop is at the same time the expression of its unity. In praying for him, the assembled community confirms its unity in fellowship with him.

The difficulty here is obvious. How can the churches pray for each other and for their unity when each is required by its liturgy to pray for its own church and its own unity? Intercession for its own hierarchy very definitely suggests self-sufficiency, especially in traditions where this intercession is not supplemented by further intercessions. Every time a church practises such intercession, is it not asserting that unity can be achieved only within its own bounds? Is it not telling the other churches that they are outsiders and not members of the fellowship?

Regular intercession for one's own church and its unity has a positive meaning, of course. The effort to achieve the unity of all the churches does not make concern for the unity of one's own church superfluous. Unity can only grow between partners to whom unity is really important. Churches which do not regularly pray for their own unity do not thereby contribute more to the unity of all. Nor are they necessarily more open to the other churches or to the world in general. To be really open to others requires a constantly renewed experience and assurance of fellowship. There is a lesson here for many Protestant churches.

The question, however, is how we understand and practise intercession for our own church and its unity. Our intercession may rest on the conviction that our own church is *the* Church and has no need of the other churches for unity. It can be exclusive in character, concerned only that its *own* unity should be achieved in an even more visible form. But it can also be based on a desire that our own church should fulfil its mission in fellowship with the others, that it should join in the common endeavour for unity and effectively serve this unity

by being united itself. Intercession will in this case be a commitment to the deepening and renewal of one's own unity. It is undoubtedly in this second way that the churches are coming more and more to understand their intercession for their own unity. They have outgrown the canons of the ancient Church which prohibited common prayer with those of a different faith. Even the Orthodox churches which adhere faithfully to the tradition of the ancient church no longer apply these canons rigorously in practice. A fellowship of common prayer for unity has grown up and the churches cannot do otherwise, therefore, than relate their own unity to this new fellowship.

But the question is whether the traditional liturgies allow sufficient room for entry into mutual intercession? Liturgical intercessions place the emphasis on unity in one's own tradition. Do they not need, therefore, to be supplemented by intercessions for other churches? Must not room be made for intercession of a more open kind, permitting an interest in the other churches, in the way Paul was interested in the churches entrusted to him?

VII. A GROWING FELLOWSHIP OF MUTUAL INTERCESSION

Although the proposal that the churches should pray for each other may seem a fairly obvious one, it could, if accepted, have far-reaching consequences for the ecumenical movement. As we have seen, intercession flows from fellowship in Christ. If the churches join together in mutual intercession, therefore, they will perforce have to re-examine their mutual relationship in the light of their responsibility to Christ. Their intercession will teach them how they should order their relationships with each other. Some thoughts on this may be offered by way of conclusion.

1. Gratitude for the Existing Fellowship

Just as Paul always begins with thanksgiving for the Christian communities, so too must we as divided churches begin our mutual intercession with thanksgiving. Above all else, intercession means giving thanks to God for one another. In their intercession for one another, the churches will focus first on the gifts God has given them. They will praise him for the witness they bear to him. They will turn in gratitude to him who has been pleased to let his name dwell in them and has therefore given them all things necessary for unity.

There are certain dangers in concentrating closely on the unity of the Church. When we pray for unity, we have to examine the details of our disunity. Our attention comes to focus not so much on unity as on our divisions. Our differences, hostilities, conscious or unconscious animosities and feelings, appear to us larger than life-size. The common ground we imagined we saw to begin with will suddenly be buried

beneath the manifest obstacles to unity. We are conscious now only of the difficulty of union and concord. As Rilke says: "The human heart lives closer to the injuries than to the miracle's melody". This is why it is so important to be brought back again and again to thanksgiving. Thanksgiving in our intercession is the only safeguard against cynicism; and how many people in the Church and in the ecumenical movement have already succumbed to cynicism!

Commitment to unity is also a dangerous enterprise because it forces us to face up squarely to the other churches. Efforts to achieve unity may in the first instance serve only to magnify the distance between us. The more clearly we see the features of another church, the more conscious we become of differences which we were only dimly aware of previously. We are at once tempted, then, to define our own positions more clearly and sharply. In this encounter we can easily become defensive. Gratitude emanates from the Gospel which holds us together, despite all differences.

Thankfulness does not mean ignoring the unfavourable aspects of the churches and their divisions. If we turn thankfulness into an abstract principle we may easily succumb to the opposite temptation of smoothing over the difficulties and dismissing any reference to obstacles and problems as a sign of spiritual immaturity. Genuine thankfulness, however, does not mean covering up our failures and unsolved problems but rather holding fast to what God has already given us and will continue to give us in his faithfulness.

2. Mutual Solidarity

Intercession will normally be the threshold to action in demonstration of our solidarity. There will be times when it will not be possible to express solidarity in such action. We shall often have to content ourselves with remaining in constant readiness for such action without actually being able to act at all. But intercession is never a substitute for such practical action. It is a concern for the other which is in constant readiness to help. We seek to understand what others need in their situation in order to bear witness to the Gospel. Interces-

sion is the mobilization of our imaginations on behalf of these others.

But intercession means our readiness not only to respond to the needs of others but also ourselves to receive from these others. In praying to God for others it is all too easy to yield to the temptation always to regard ourselves as the givers. But in fact, in interceding for others we are also bringing ourselves before God. As we intercede for them we realize that we ourselves are also in need of their intercession. We become receptive to what they give to us through their intercessions. Such reciprocity is particularly important for inter-church relationships. Churches find it much easier to give than to receive. They see very clearly the “contribution” they have to make to the ecumenical movement and what the other churches should, therefore, receive from them. They can expatiate on the “special contribution” they are called to make. But when it comes to their learning from other churches, problems begin. Suddenly the doors are shut. The churches remember once more their “inalienable identity”. But intercession is a constant giving and receiving. It is a fellowship in which partners live and grow, together.

Intercession thus leads us to self-examination. Our encounter with others in intercession raises the question of our position in fellowship with them, where we have a real contribution to make to them but also where we ourselves fail and need to be changed. Intercession begins with our own renewal in faith and witness. The churches can grow in solidarity only if they display openness of this kind in their mutual relationships. How far is our own tradition a stumbling block to the other churches? What changes are called for in our own life and witness if we are to be of real service to the other churches? We can only move towards other churches if we are constantly seeking an answer to these questions.

Intercession will begin, therefore, in our own locality. It would be idle to pray for the churches throughout the world if we were not first to intercede for those which are our neighbours. How could we possibly pray for other churches if we were not as a matter of priority seeking fellowship with those closest to us? We owe it to the churches throughout the world

to achieve unity and common witness in the place where we live and seek to fulfil our calling effectively. As we intercede for our neighbour churches we may discover a surprising resistance in ourselves. It is easier to intercede for remote partners than for those close at hand. But precisely for this reason, the local dimension of intercession is the touchstone of our readiness for real mutual solidarity.

3. Knowing Each Other Better

If the churches are to pray for each other in a real way, they need to know one another far better than they do. In a general way, at least, we must know for whom we are praying. The proposal that the churches should pray for one another, therefore, is also a summons to them to acquire fuller and more accurate knowledge of each other. There is an intimate connection, a constant interaction, between intercession and knowledge. Intercession becomes possible as the churches become familiar with each other's opportunities and difficulties. When churches resolve to pray for each other, they are led to seek such deeper knowledge of one another. Intercession is a living reality, therefore, only when it is accompanied by a constant interchange of information. This service was already a reality in New Testament times in the shape of letters, visits, and meetings between congregations.

Intercession has an almost fatal tendency to get lost in abstract generalities. General concerns are brought before God in abstract language. Even in their intercessions for each other, the churches can fall into this danger. It can become an exercise which is performed simply by rote. The prayers used can lack profile. It is vital, therefore, that the churches should try really hard to get to know each other better.

The aim here should be to learn how the churches actually live today. In our dealings with other churches it is so easy to start from our own traditional stereotypes of them, which no longer correspond to the facts. We have our own set ideas of the various confessional traditions and project these ideas onto the churches of these traditions as if nothing had meanwhile changed. Or we allow ourselves to be guided by accounts

of a situation which were given us long ago but have long since been out of date. The first step to real mutual knowledge, therefore, must be constantly to revise what we already think we know of one another. Our information needs constant updating. Otherwise it will not really be the other churches we are bringing before God in our intercessions but a distorted picture of them. Mutual solidarity will then rest on false assumptions.

The question arises, however, as to whether it is ever possible for us to acquire such knowledge of all the churches. Are we not asking too much when we propose that the churches should pray for all the others in the course of a year? An adequate knowledge of the churches he founded was still possible for Paul. But how could anyone today possibly claim to have an adequate knowledge of the situation of all the churches? Would it not be better, then, if each church confined itself to one or two situations? The answer is obvious. Intercession can be really concrete and specific only if it is limited in scope. Only between a few partners is genuine mutual solidarity possible in practice. To pray for all the churches cannot possibly mean each church giving equal attention to all the others. That would simply mean that no single one of the churches prayed for would be brought adequately into focus. In practice, intercession calls for selectivity in relationships.

It remains essential, nevertheless, that each church should intercede for all the churches. Although one church cannot concentrate on all, it must still remain open to the whole Christian fellowship. It must have some idea at least of the life of all the churches. It must remain aware of the fact that the relationships which it *is* in a position to cultivate are only part of the larger whole. The kind of intercession which is being proposed serves to remind the churches constantly of this larger whole. The purpose is to help each church to remain at least “potentially” in relationship with all the others.

We also need this sense of the larger whole if we are to deal responsibly with special political developments and events. It is quite natural for us in our intercessions to make reference to contemporary events and in this way to bring them to God in prayer. How could we possibly remain silent about anything

which concerns us? Obviously, then, we will think especially of countries and churches caught in the ravages of war and disaster. But this form of intercession has its drawbacks. In many cases it is all too short-lived. Once the news cools, we tend to put it on one side. Not many years ago, for example, there were regular references to Vietnam, Angola, and Mozambique. These places receive less attention today even though they still depend on our solidarity. In the choice of situations to be mentioned in public prayers, too, we are often guided by our political judgements. We refer to situations which touch our personal political emotions most closely. Some will refer to the churches in socialist countries, especially China and Albania, for example. Others will refer rather to South Africa and Latin America. Yet others will offer a carefully diluted mixture so as to avoid any suspicion of political bias. Awareness of the larger whole is especially important here. We can only pray responsibly for churches in special situations of difficulty, if we are also moved by a concern for all the churches. Our intercessions are then the concrete expression of our total intercession and not just dictated by what happens to be in the headlines at a particular juncture.

4. Intercession for the Persecuted and the Suffering

Intercessions will be offered, above all, for those who suffer for the sake of the Gospel. Oppressed and suffering churches, Christians subject to discrimination, falsely accused, in prison, kidnapped and tortured, because of their faith — these all have a special claim to be remembered in our intercessions.

But in what spirit should we remember them? As we have seen, Paul's prayer was above all that the Christian community should remain steadfast and faithful. What most concerned him in his intercession for the Christian communities was their witness to the Gospel. By its very character, the Gospel provokes hostility and resistance. The sufferings Christians are exposed to, therefore, are not something extraordinary. On the contrary, there is an element of fulfilment in them. What matters most is that the Christian communities should understand and accept their sufferings in this light.

This attitude is still valid today for individual Christians and Christian communities who suffer persecution. The churches will also pray, of course, that such hostility may end and will do their utmost to see that the persecuted are delivered from their sufferings and their witness received. The churches would be failing to demonstrate their solidarity if they were not to do their best in this direction. But in all their endeavours they will not lose sight of the witness to the Gospel. They will not pray for deliverance if this will only be at the expense of the witness to the Gospel. Above all, they will do their utmost to ensure that these churches receive the material and spiritual aid they need in order to maintain their witness.

We must distinguish carefully here. It is part of the Church's task to promote justice in society. The churches will always pay particular attention, therefore, to those who are the victims of injustice for whatever reason. To speak up when fundamental human rights are violated is part of their witness to the Gospel. But when it is the churches who are the victims of injustice, persecution and suffering, this cannot be viewed and dealt with in the same way. What has to be understood here, above all, is the connection between these sufferings and the witness required of the Church. If the churches see here only a violation of human rights and immediately protest against it on this score, they are ignoring the vital dimension of witness. Their attention is being focused on the injustice rather than on the witness to the Gospel. The language appropriate to intercession here is the language of solidarity rather than that of protest.

A special situation arises, of course, when the injustice, persecution and suffering is inflicted by Christians. Protest is then called for, indeed more than protest. Intercession for the oppressors must then be combined with frank repudiation and normally, also public resistance.

If this focus on witness in suffering is to be genuine, of course, the interceding churches must see persecution and suffering as signs through which God is speaking to them. The question they have to ask themselves is how steadfast they really are themselves in their faith, and how far they are really bearing witness to the Gospel in their own part of the

world. Intercession for the witness of other churches is only genuine if it is accompanied by the renewal of our own witness.

5. Limits of the Church's Proclamation

For all its insistence on the witness of the Church, intercession is at the same time a constant reminder that the success of this witness is not in our keeping. The Gospel is accompanied by no guarantee that it will change this world. The Church's proclamation will constantly come up against its limits. Its action in society will lead only to significant, symbolic achievements. Although the churches must constantly struggle together to bear effective witness in the world, they must understand that what they achieve is finally subject to the will and wisdom of God. Paul prays that God may open a door for the Gospel, but he also knows that the door may remain shut. The Church may have to wait a long time before closed doors.

In its prayers and intercessions, the Church brings its hopes and its works to God. It commits itself to him. It knows that God's will in history cannot be identified with its own expectations. His mercy and judgement may choose other ways. The Church has then to respect the mystery of his will. When its intercession remains ineffective, it must accept this. But as it trusts itself to him, it is at the same time protected from the paralyzing effects of failure. It remains free for the future. It remains open for love.

As they accept the common bond of mutual intercession, therefore, the churches will also strengthen one another in their freedom for the future and their openness for love.

APPENDIX

The idea of intercession for the Church in all lands was very much alive even in earlier centuries. We may take heart (as people perhaps did then) from the attempt of the Swiss pietist Pastor Hieronymous Annoni in this direction in the 18th century. After much travel, he lived for many years at Muttenz near Basel, where he died in 1770. As a preacher he attracted large crowds, especially from the nearby towns. People came to hear him in such great numbers that the authorities became alarmed. To hinder them, they decided not to open the city gates on Sundays until after the time of service. Annoni was not only a preacher but a religious poet, too. One of his best-known poems includes a long intercessory hymn, in which he asks for God's blessing on fellow Christians in the places he had visited in the course of his travels. We give some extracts from this poem, in an English translation.

Spirit moved, the Christian's delight
's to visit oft by day and night
Zion's children both far and near,
Beseech the cov'nant angel t'hear
And bless 'em all, in schism's despite.
In all the quiet ways he sighs,
With others sings and begs likewise,
Cries aloud to God in heaven's height.

1. Open door, for all poor sinners!
Light, salvation and blessing's well!
Throne of grace for us beginners,
Merciful most, Emmanuel!
Grant, Lord, I may always be
A singing beggar, free in Thee!

After visiting various regions he comes to the French-speaking part of Switzerland.

9. Bless all who name and know Thee, Lord,
In populous Canton de Vaud.
What still has life within it, Lord,
Turn sated from Welsh vanity's show.
Pour heavenly wine and oil as well
On Geneva and Neuchatel!

But hard as he tries to rise above "Schism's despite", his intercessions across the denominational boundaries sometimes reveal certain limitations, too:

19. Let those at length see dawn, O Lord,
Who perforce or blindly feed
At the meagre papistic board
Where the fare does growth impede!
Above all, let Thy mercy rest
On poor Bohemians unblest!

20. To Zwingli's and to Calvin's heirs
Send earnest pastors for their souls
Make wholly pure the faith that's theirs,
Give humble lives which grace controls.
So on many a flock supine
Thy light and fire again may shine!

Annoni's conclusion could certainly be aptly applied to the "Ecumenical Prayer Calendar":

If aught, my Saviour, I've left out,
Thyself make good my song throughout!
Since measureless Thy grace and wealth,
Thy well-spring's endless, bringing health,
Then let it sprinkle all my song
With thanks and jubilee lifelong!

Note: Cf. Chr. Joh. Riggerbach, *Hieronymous Annoni, Ein Abriss seines Lebens sammt einer Auswahl seiner Lieder*, Basel, 1870, pp. 76ff. Also Gustav Adolf Manner, "Hieronymous Annoni", in *Der Reformation verpflichtet*, Basel, 1979, p. 71.

The ecumenical prayer calendar was first published in 1978 under the title *For all God's people*, Ecumenical Prayer Cycle, WCC Geneva.