

---

Spring 1998

## The Prayer of the Active Apostle

Thomas McKenna C.M., S.T.D.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj>

---

### Recommended Citation

McKenna, Thomas C.M., S.T.D. (1998) "The Prayer of the Active Apostle," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol19/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact [digitalservices@depaul.edu](mailto:digitalservices@depaul.edu).

# The Prayer of the Active Apostle

BY

THOMAS MCKENNA, C.M.

## *The Issue*

A line often overheard when in the company of the Vincentian family: “How do I get it all together?” The conversation continues. “I want contact with God, and so I pray. But I also want to show poor people how much they are worth and so I put myself at their service. A little prayer, a little service—fine. But then there is the rest of life: friends and intimates to relate to, bills to pay, families to love, politics to participate in, books to read, businesses to run. In addition, there is the leisure I need just to let things settle. And then again come those immediate demands of the poor, together with my everyday need for spiritual nourishment. This Vincentian calling is all very consoling to consider on a calm workshop weekend. But out in the field of actual gospel service, how do I hold it all together?”

For believers who would be apostles, that has always been one of *the* questions. If a disciple takes one path or the other, it seems clear enough. If you want to be a “pray-er,” head for the monastery; if a hands-on servant, go to the streets of the city. But to do both, each at times seeming to pull in the opposite direction? There is a deep intuition that somehow it *is* both. But in the concrete, how does this happen? In what **way** do they come together? What wisdom is available for integrating the two, so that rather than pulling each other apart, they run in the same direction and even come to nourish one another?

This article addresses this tension. In the tradition, it has been spoken about (misleadingly perhaps) as the relationship between contemplation and action. In our day, it is the question, “how do you do it all?” In Vincent’s time it took the form of “how exactly **do** you leave God for God?”

## *Vincent, the Expert*

Overcoming the split between action and prayer is an issue on which Vincent de Paul lays as much claim to expertise as anyone in the Christian tradition. For one thing, he struggled with it over an entire lifetime. From the beginning of his days with Pierre de Bérulle when

the young Vincent worked to incorporate the spiritual director's teaching with his own service to the sick poor in Paris, to the end of his life when he spent time advising his priests and sisters on how to combine the ways of the cloistered contemplative with the lifestyle of an apostle, Vincent was forever wrestling with this tension. The wisdom he came to on the subject was no disconnected theory about the structural setup of how prayer and action relate. Rather, his insight was born in the intensely engaged climate of his own experience.

Second, in a time when there were relatively few supports from the spiritual outlooks of his day, he actually *did* this kind of praying. That is, most all of the approaches acknowledged the difference between what might be called apostolic and contemplative life. But hardly any (save Ignatius Loyola), at least in a structured way, successfully addressed the issue of how the two are integrated.

Though not with a worked-out theory or a school of praying, Vincent arrived at a practically oriented way to hold the two in a fruitful tension. When read for his overall approach, it is clear that he did not give the wrong kind of priority to either one, i.e., one more important than the other, one an outgrowth of the other, one a secondary result of the other. Subordinating action to prayer was the reigning position, stitched into most all the spiritual approaches of his day. It is fair to say that Vincent came to a practical balancing of the two sides in a time before the language was available to express their underlying mutuality. How might a contemporary get a fix on his wisdom about this perennial religious issue?

### *Vincent's Holism*

We begin with a few of Vincent's own words which, in one way of seeing things, uncover some central pillars in his approach to prayer—and for that matter to everything else he believed about the Christian life. In a 1656 letter to a seminary rector, Vincent wrote:

Our Lord stamps his seal on us, and we are given the strength of his spirit. We bound to him as is the vinebranch to the vinestock. We do the very same things he did on earth. We accomplish his divine actions—all of this as his children, filled with his spirit.

We should have intense communication with Lord in prayer. This is the reservoir where you will find the guid-

ance you will need to carry out your job. When you have hesitations, turn to God and say to Him, "My Lord, the Father of Lights, teach me what I need to know in this situation."<sup>1</sup>

While this is indeed a short excerpt, it captures a number of elements which wind through Vincent's thought. It pivots on a classic biblical analogy which shines a light on a characteristic suffusing his entire spirituality.

### *The Vine and The Branches*

The vine and its branches is a metaphor of a living organism. It evokes qualities associated with vitality, and with the mutual connection of all parts.

One aspect of this might be called interconnection. Each section of the plant is internally linked to all the other parts. What happens in one is not only felt in all the rest, but is in a real sense contained in all the others. To be inside of one part is to be influenced by what is going on in every other part.

This condition is the exact opposite of mechanical linkage; that is, the juxtaposition of independent entities. This second kind of connection means walled-off compartments, clear and distinct borders, no-mads not dependent on one another. The inside of any one is not scented with the flavor of any of the others. Each segment feels total and does not need the touch of anything different from itself to be complete.

By contrast, in the organic world, boundaries exist but are not airtight. The difference between sections is real, but more a matter of proportion and emphasis than hard and fast division. Complementarity rather than separation is a better way to describe how the parts relate. Because of the porous boundaries, one really cannot talk about one without implying the others.

The presence of the whole in each part explains the organism's wondrous power of self-correction. Built into every part of the plant is an ability to right itself, a kind of inner gyroscope which brings each part back on balance when temporarily off kilter. The rest of the

---

<sup>1</sup>Vincent de Paul, Letter to Antoine Durand, 1656, in Pierre Coste, C.M., ed., *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, C.M., 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), 11: 344. (Hereafter cited as *CED*).

organism moves to correct imbalances in any one part, marshaling all its influences, so to speak, and sending them to the diseased area in order to restore the lost equilibrium. This healing of the part by the whole reveals the overall interdependence at work, the constant move toward holism.

Lest this analogy get so complicated it will not lead us back to Vincent, let us backtrack to set out some initial points.

The first is what might be called Vincent's holism. For a number of reasons, Vincent's account of the spiritual life does not admit of hard and fast lines between the different components of holiness. There is a complementarity and circularity in his writings, a bent toward the both/and much more than the either/or. And so he will defend *both* regularity at prayer exercises *and* the irregularity at them that comes of serving the poor. He will talk about transparent truth-telling *and* holding back the truth when discretion requires it. He will counsel *both* stringent mortification *and* moderation of such practices. He will issue *both* warnings against contact with the opposite sex *and* advice to take sexual attraction in stride. In particular for this topic of prayer, he comes down on the side of *both* formal prayer *and* vigorous, laborious action.

Another way of saying it, the boundaries of his kind of discipleship are quite porous and bendable. A person with a liking for clear and distinct ideas will stumble when reading Vincent because he can very often be quoted for (and act on) both sides of an issue. The tidy thinker might be exasperated at this lack of consistency, but there is something else going on in Vincent. It has to do with his feel for the whole, his sense that at some level all the contraries come together, because once seen from the vantage point of the entire organism, they are present "inside one another." Further, because of that kind of inner connectedness, they act to correct the extremes each can fall into when standing on its own. There is a tongue-in-cheek adage that goes, "I'd rather be right than consistent!" Vincent is one of the people who could subscribe to that, if we understand that he does so from a logic that is much more biotic than mechanical.

### *Vincent's Wisdom On Prayer*

There is a sentence in a letter Vincent writes to François de Coudray which can serve to introduce the "organic" flavor of which we speak. Reflecting on the life of solitude the missionaries lead at home and the

hectic and intensely engaged life they follow on the road, Vincent points to the link between the two: "...it is this prayerful solitude which makes us desire to work out in the field and this work which makes us desire the solitude."<sup>2</sup> In other words, each phase contains seeds and tastes of the other. Each feeds off the other, and each does not make full sense without the other. In the way he views this duality, classically known as the relationship between action and contemplation, Vincent not only shows his hand on some his deepest instincts on how the spiritual life functions, but also sets out a "way" that makes a genuine contribution to Christian wisdom on discipleship.

First off, it is worthwhile to once again underline his feel for the whole. For him, there is no isolating formal prayer from apostolic action, nor vice versa. To immerse oneself in one is eventually to come upon the other.

Vincent writes to a very young and very new rector of a seminary, Antoine Durand, about how to be sure to say and do the right thing. Vincent puts it this way: "I give you this advice (i.e., to pray) in order than you might understand God immediately and hear what it is you have to teach. Imitate Moses who told the people of Israel those things which God inspired in him..."<sup>3</sup>

In other words, the external action (right teaching) is an outgrowth of the internal connection (prayer). Prayer opens to action.

A little later in the same letter, Vincent reverses direction and speaks of how apostolic activity bends back toward prayer. He counsels the young confrere: "You should have recourse to prayer in order to ask Our Lord for the needs of those whom you have to lead."

Here we find the beginnings of prayer right in the midst of the apostolic activity. Vincent sees a mutually implicating circularity between praying for the coming of the Kingdom and acting to bring it about.

### *An Interpretive Framework*

Secondly, it can be helpful to construct a framework from which to view the lines of this mutuality. This is the case not only because a proper schema can better anchor the shape of the relationship in one's mind, but also because there is a good deal of terminological confusion surrounding the whole issue. And so we briefly digress from

---

<sup>2</sup> Letter of September 12, 1631, *CED*, 1: 122.

<sup>3</sup> Letter of 1656, *CED*, 11: 344.

Vincent, first to clarify some vocabulary and then to lay out a grid against which to review his teaching.

The first set of clarifications has to do with the word “prayer,” as Vincent uses it. There is one sense it has as “prayers,” or “prayer time.” Here it means formal prayers, those occasions and activities which are explicitly set aside for undivided attention to God’s presence. Common mental prayer, the Eucharist, the liturgy of the hours, shared prayer—these are all instances of this understanding which names the explicit, recognizable and conscious act of praying. Vincent’s writings are sprinkled with commentaries and instructions on this meaning of prayer. And to be sure, he is insistent that his co-workers be disciplined and steady in their practice of it.

But there is a wider sense attributed to prayer that has to do with the whole way a person comes before God. Here prayer means a generic openness, a life stance, an attitude of attunement and receptivity before God in creation. Paul speaks of this as “unceasing prayer,” the attentive bearing with which the disciple regards all of life as gift from the Provident God. It is the individual’s habitual “abiding” in God.

This second kind, prayer as an all-embracing attitude, is the ground and backdrop out of which the first kind of praying happens—or, should happen. Formal prayers at their best are outcroppings, explicitations, and articulations of the grounding kind. They are times of bringing the hidden conversation going on in “prayerfulness” to conscious visibility. Periods of mental prayer, for instance, are meant to gather up and give words to the praying that is going on ceaselessly within a person’s heart in a mostly unconscious way.

However as is also evident, there can be a separation—and indeed a dissonance—between the outer and inner words. Not all formal prayer springs from prayerfulness. The spiritual writer Henri Nouwen refers to the total praying act as a practice of “holding my mind in my heart as I come before God.”<sup>4</sup> His expression sheds light on the potential for differences between explicit prayers which are clear but superficial and those which live from a depth. Not holding the mind in the heart produces words which ground themselves rather than the kind of words which are echoes of *The Word*. Formal prayers could be just surface expressions or they could be utterances resounding from the most profound spots in a person’s being.

---

<sup>4</sup>Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: The Seabury Press 1981), 76.

For clarity's sake, let us call the first kind "head prayer" and the second "heart prayer." While this is not conventional terminology, it can help sort out the issue. The confusion comes from using the same word, "prayer," for both realities.

A second clarification concerns the notion of action or, more generically, "doing." In this case too, our distinction revolves around the notion of grounding. As with the confusion about the word, "prayer," one can say, "there is apostolic action—and there is apostolic action." That is, there is a type which seems the genuine article (uses the right words, is at the service of others, etc.), but which does not flow up from the deeper well of living contact with God. Initially it is nearly impossible for the do-er or her co-workers to say which is which because help is being given. But in time, problems arise.

For one, the assistance begins to have a shallow feel to it. Because the activity is not in touch with its innermost purpose, it comes across as technique only, as a going through the motions without conveying the care that is supposedly behind them. At first they look virtuous, but in time get revealed as being done for some reason other than "the sake of the Kingdom." And often enough, the superficiality begins to show up in the apostle who gives the service, not feeding her but gradually bringing on exhaustion.

Another possibility is that the "help" comes to have a driven quality to it. People experience the activity as done for its own sake rather than for the gospel which supposedly motivates it. A slight variation is when the servant develops an addiction to his service. He cannot stop giving it—even when it is no longer helping. The activity itself becomes intoxicating. It cements such a powerful link to the person's identity that her very sense of being alive gets equated with "keeping busy," and inactivity brings on the sensation of fading away.

Reinforcing this fallacy is the ease with which this activity (done for its own sake) is given holy interpretations. "Isn't he zealous, look at the intensity of that commitment, let her energy be an example for the rest of us, etc." The Vincentian tradition of hard-working service provides a whole armament of language with which to construct this illusion.

There is, however, the other kind of action. It is the type which is transparent to something deep within, the touch of God. This is rooted action, the bringing-into-being of apostolic impulses which emanate from God's own Self, dwelling at the core of the apostle. There is a solidity here, a sure-footed resonance between the service given and



the care it is meant to spread. It “rings true,” resounds in harmony with the *cantus firmus* which is playing underneath it. It comes across as genuine, as symbolic in the full sense of delivering what it symbolizes. Most tellingly, the ones who are being served believe it. They are religiously nourished by it.

In addition, this latter kind of action has the taste of freedom to it. It does not *have* to be done, if it in fact is not the action which best carries God’s will. And if the situation calls for inaction, that occurs because the external step is following the internal movement—which on this occasion dictates, do nothing.

Finally, there is direction in the activity. Not following its own lights, it allows itself be guided by its own inner compass, the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Staying with our distinctions, let us call the first kind “activity” and the second “action.” Action is grounded activity; activity is pseudo-action, the commotion which is not rooted in any purpose deeper than its own momentum.

To complete the picture, we touch on praying again, specifically the pseudo-form we have termed head prayer. At first glance there might appear to be more possibilities for doing to go wrong, but that is not the case. In fact, the arena in which prayer’s illusions probably show themselves most tellingly is in this realm of the relationship between prayer and service.

Divorced from activity, prayer can turn escapist. In the guise of “pure” and untainted contact with God, it can mask the agenda of the person who is afraid of real engagement with God’s creation. This is the individual who should “get out of the chapel” and get his hands dirty, fall a bit in life, lose some control—and most importantly begin to meet Jesus as “he plays in ten thousand places” in the wider world. Prayer for him is insulation from reality.

Cut off from action, prayer can also lose itself in fantasy. A person who never acts but only “prays” can begin to believe that what she imagines or thinks in prayer is actually who she really is. Anyone who has finished a retreat filled with ideal self-images of how she relates to her world and then two days later crashes on the shore of unbending reality knows this illusion well.

Finally, disembodied prayer can also fool itself through abstraction—and this is perhaps the strongest of all the temptations in head prayer. Praying begins to feel like writing a sharply outlined lecture. The person thinks he knows God when actually what he knows is

some structure connected with God which (as structure) is skeletal and gaunt. Again, it is the cold shock of recognition when trying to “do” the abstraction which reveals the thinness of the prayer. The point is simply that prayer cut off from action runs its own gamut of risks, more subtle and therefore perhaps more perilous than the dangers in activism.

With these usages in mind, we now consider the structures in the relationship between doing and praying. As the accompanying diagram illustrates, the two relate to one another (a) tensively, and (b) foundationally (through a common foundation).

By tensively we mean that each mode functions best when held in tension by its opposite. Each acts to correct the other, pulling it back on line when tempted to drift off into its weaker and illusory form.

And so for instance, we see that the penchant of heart-based prayer to dilute into abstraction or imaginative fantasy is checked by apostolic action. The “pray-er” who consistently goes out and dirties his hands in the messiness of ministry finds it harder to remain in the thin air of his own musings as he searches for God. The disciple who labors to love God with the strength of her arm and sweat of her brow grows wise in the difference between the gods who live in her rarefied imagination and the God whom she meets when actually breaking the bread of service.

By the same token, shallow activism is brought back on line by time spent before God “doing nothing.” It is precisely that inner spaciousness which allows the compulsive activist to step back from the constant movement, to step off the treadmill to assess where all the activity is headed. It is the rhythm of so called “non-productive” praying which allows a more grounded motivation to take shape and hold together the dispersion that creeps into active ministry. Formal times of prayer can be wedges which keep open the doors to the grace which is the only guiding backdrop for apostolic action.

In short, each mode can save the other. Action pulls head prayer back into the fuller regions of the heart. Formal prayer saves action from mutating into compulsive and mindless activity.

There is another more basic way the two relate, one that is more vertical than horizontal. Prayer and action are united at their roots; they are connected through a common foundation.

Both action and heart prayer are anchored to the same ocean floor, so to speak. And that is, the substratum of full, living contact with God. All authentic praying (not the weakened kind) flows up from the

praying that is forever being done within the Trinity. As Saint Paul describes it, the deep sighs of our prayers are echoes of the much deeper sighing that Christians have come to recognize as the Holy Spirit. In the same way, all activity which is genuinely on behalf of the Kingdom is an outer stirring of movements that are going on within the Three Personed God. The category that best catches this insight is the Will of God. God has purposes that will be carried out. To *do* God's will is to act in concert with these purposes. It is to become a medium through which these intentions take on the flesh of action. The do-er of the Word is someone prodded and guided by the deeper running current of what God wishes to do in creation. This apostle "does God's will on earth as it is (being done) in heaven."

To say it still another way, prayer and action converge at their base. Both spring out of the one fathomless pool of God's presence in the world. This is the more basic cause why one nourishes the other: each drinks from the same well, each is a different shoot off the same stem. They are cousins and so have enough genetic closeness, enough family resemblance, to be grafted—one onto the other. That is the underlying reason the one searches out its opposite: each has a piece of the underlying map the other needs in order to find its way. Each carries food the other requires.

Thomas Merton, for one, would call the Christian's immersion in this deep pool, contemplation.<sup>5</sup> It is in that activity, and at that level, that the person has full awareness *of* God. And it is in this awareness that the believer begins to live fully *from* God. To the extent that action and heart prayer are rooted in such contemplation does each become what it should be, clear and powerful outcroppings of God's presence in the world.

Let us use the coordinates of this map to situate Vincent's insights on prayer and action. We begin with a familiar line of thought found in a sizeable number of his conferences to the Daughters.

He had spoken to them frequently about the way in which prayer fits into the unpredictability of an active day. Vincent insisted they keep the discipline of times for formal prayer. But again and again he brought up the special exception—the pressing needs of the poor. His famous logic: leave God for God. Leave the prie-Dieu to help the needy neighbor, and the God you seek in the first of those places will show Himself in the second. But it is in one conference particularly

---

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, (New York: New Directions Press, 1961), 2-5.

that the depth of his conviction comes through. He tells the sisters that they do not have to “make up” attendance at Sunday mass when called away to help some poor person. One could hardly call Vincent “lax,” and so we know this judgment springs from some deeply held belief. That tenet is: the same God you meet in your quiet hour of liturgy is there in your crisis encounter with the poor person. If the Eucharist is giving thanks to God through sacramental encounter with Jesus, then the Eucharist happens in both settings. This is Vincent’s repeated position and shows his sure-handed confidence when crossing between prayer and action. More than any other, this compressed advice serves to crystallize his conviction about how the two relate.

The key insight, so it seems, is that both praying and service are rooted in the one underlying reality—the awareness of God’s presence and care at the heart of life. Because both prayer and service are sprouts from the same soil, the one can change into the other and still remain an avenue onto God’s Way. In the language of our framework, both realities are rooted in the contemplative stance. Active service springs up from union with God and enables the servant to know God in both the service given and the one being served. Recollected prayer rises up out of the same ground, as it brings awareness of such union to conscious focus. To state it slightly differently, the one contemplative base shines through in both action and “in-action,” in both doing and being. Both give access to God and both can be expressions of God.

A corollary is that the cause for both prayer and action drifting toward their distorted forms is loss of contact with their true grounding. Thinned out and illusory head prayer is prayer detached from its deep moorings. Likewise, the bogus forms of action are apostolic activities out of touch with their base.

Speaking in Vincent’s terms, prayer that begins to get fascinated with itself (“lost in lofty thoughts and pious feelings”) has turned sour because it is no longer in proximity to the love of God which grounds it. Also, this kind of praying loses balance because it no longer pulled by awareness of God’s call in the concrete needs of others. Conversely, zeal which burns out the apostle has turned noxious because it is motivated by something other than the love of God. It moves toward compulsivity because the actor has lost the ability to enter into the silent “uselessness” of prayer which he needs to free up (detach) his actions.

A modern commentary on Vincent’s spirituality, the 1984 *Consti-*

*tutions* of his own Congregation of the Mission, treats this issue in an enlightening way. Article 42 describes a unity between apostolic involvement and the experience of God in prayer. The two complement each other, it states, and together create “an organic” unity in the life of the practitioner. “When we pray...apostolic zeal is constantly renewed; and in action, the love of God and neighbor becomes visible in an effective way.” In other words, the pair are complementary because both flow out of the selfsame love of God.

The last sentence of the article presents the classic language. “Through the intimate union of prayer and apostolate, a missionary becomes a contemplative in action and an apostle in prayer.” That is, when acting, he tries to do so from the contemplative stance—he notices and attends to the love of God contained in the action he is doing. And when praying, he does so from an apostolic outlook—he lets himself be absorbed by the love of God he has encountered in his interaction with God’s little ones. Both prayer and action are fed by the sense of God’s underlying presence; i.e., contemplative awareness. One flows into the other because of each’s common foundation—attentiveness to God’s love at work in the world.

One qualification needs mentioning. Even though Vincent thought the borders between prayer and action to be porous, he never collapsed one into the other—as if a person could eliminate one or the other. In a conference to the Daughters about prioritizing time for mass and service to the poor, he does say the sister can excuse herself from the Eucharist if the apostolic need is a grave one. But then he goes on to instruct them that the previous step is to organize their day better. And in so doing “they will have the time for both.”<sup>6</sup>

Vincent often observed that the most fruitful apostolates were the ones fed by prayer. He could say this precisely because the kind of prayer he speaks of is living contact with the Source; i.e., contemplation. In a 1658 letter, Vincent wrote:

Prayer is the great book for the preacher. In prayer you will draw on the divine truth found in the Eternal Word, that is, the source of all... With the help of this (kind of) prayer, you will touch hearts. I pray that God give you the spirit of prayer.”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> CED, 9: 215-216.

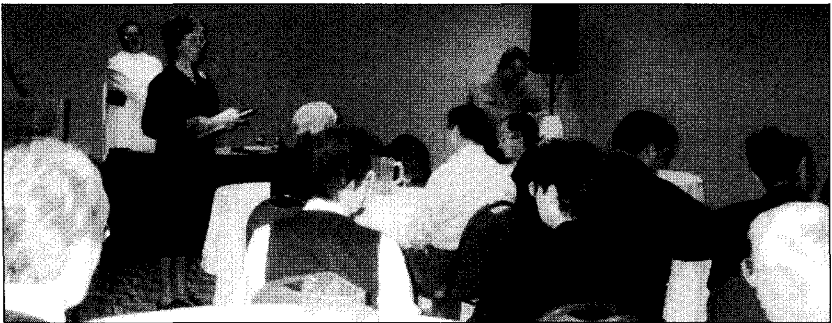
<sup>7</sup> CED, 7: 156.

A modern Vincentian commentator speaks of the opposite, the flow from apostolic action back to prayer. Citing the practice of many in Vincent's family who find God in the midst of activity for the poor, he observes how the right kind of service is a "strong moment of prayer."<sup>8</sup> During the transaction one can speak with Christ in the secret of her heart. One can also join her voice with the voice of the poor person to help him "perceive the presence of Christ." This is a contemplative move if ever there was one.

### *Conclusion*

The organic is a quality marking many of the words Vincent used about prayer. It can lead to further appreciation of why he could be so bold and so confident in maintaining that prayer and action feed each other and need each other. The organic instinct supplies a crucial piece for the puzzle once described by a researcher who said, "It is hard to think of anyone who could say one thing so strongly, and then say and do just the opposite, as Vincent de Paul." The contention of this article is that he made opposites come together because he knew the underlying source out of which they all sprang. With that in mind, let us listen once again to his interweaving of the two sides of apostolic prayer....

We are living a life as solitary in Paris as the Carthusians...and this solitude makes us aspire to work in the apostolic fields. And the work there makes us desire solitude.



Celebrating mass Saturday evening.

<sup>8</sup> Carlo Braga, C.M., "The Constitutions of the Congregation of the Mission on Prayer," (unpublished talk), # 56.

