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Nels Ferré's Career, Character and Devotional Centre

I never had conversation with Ferré, but, in my student days, I heard him give a lecture in the Faculty of Theology of the University of Manchester during his sojourn at Hartley Victoria College (1956-1957). Founded in 1904, the Faculty was a pioneering one—the first free-standing, non-denominational faculty of theology in England. From the outset, theological degrees were (unusually for the time) open to women; the study of Comparative Religion was pioneered and made compulsory; later came the first lectureship in Christian Ethics. The Faculty comprised University-recruited scholars, A.S. Peake among them, together with scholars from the eight surrounding theological colleges, among them the Congregationalists, W.F. Adeney and Robert Mackintosh, the Baptist, J.T. Marshall, the Methodist, J.H. Moulton, and the Unitarian, Alexander Gordon—a roll-call that confirms the eschewing by the University of religious tests either for students or academic staff.¹ Partly in order to calm those in the denominational constituencies who were blessed with peculiarly sensitive doctrinal antennae, and partly to reassure those who doubted that theology was a sufficiently “scientific” discipline for admission to a university, it was provided that “no question should be asked in examination which called for an expression of religious beliefs . . . and every year a small committee of the Faculty scrutinises all examination papers in theology to see that the rule is complied with.”² Consistently with this, while the professors and lecturers were uninhibited in expressing

1. The University's Charter of 1903 made it unlawful for the institution “to adopt or impose on any person any test whatever of religious belief or profession in order to entitle him or her to be admitted as a Professor Teacher Student or Member of the University or to hold any office therein or to graduate thereat or to enjoy or exercise any privilege thereof.” Quoted by Parsons, “The Commemoration of the Twenty-first Anniversary of the Establishment of the Theological Faculty,” 54.
2. Manson, “The First Fifty Years,” 11.

their opinions of a scholarly-critical kind, they did not divulge their personal beliefs in class (though since we students knew that a number of them preached regularly, we assumed that they had some religious convictions of their own). In this rigorous scholarly environment, it was staggering to see Ferré at the podium wearing his Christian heart on his sleeve. His self-description as a liberal theologian notwithstanding, he had an evangelical fervour in proclaiming his gospel, and in that context, it fell strangely on our ears. It is altogether likely that we would have been less surprised had a Martian been introduced as the day's guest lecturer. The same note of vibrant conviction resounds in Ferré's writings: "The spiritual glow is almost always present. The style is often direct and almost conversational, even when thought is hard to follow."¹

Who was Nels Ferré? He was born in the northern Swedish city of Luleå on 8 June 1908. As he later discovered, "The first time my mother held me in her arms she said, 'This child is born on the day of Pentecost, the day of the Spirit. I dedicate him to the ministry of the Spirit.'"² In proceeding to expose the bare bones of Ferré's life and career,³ I welcome enlightenment from Frederick Ferré as to his father's early and student years:

Nels Fredrik Solomon Ferré . . . was born the second son (and third child) of a sternly orthodox Swedish Baptist preacher, Frans August Ferré, and of a loving and irrepressible mother, Maria Wickman Ferré. At the age of 13, young Nels left his family (by then grown to eight children) to emigrate alone to the United States in search of educational opportunity.⁴ He found what he sought and made the most of his chances, studying his way on scholarships through Boston University (A.B., 1931), Andover Newton Theological Seminary (B.D., 1934), and Harvard (A.M., 1936; Ph.D., 1938).⁵

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1. Duthie, "The God who is Involved," 13.
 2. Ferré, *The Extreme Center*, 150.
 3. In the following brief biographical sketch, I draw upon the following papers by Ferré's son and daughter: Frederick Ferré, "Nels F.S. Ferré on Ultimate Reality and the Meaning of Human Life," and Faith V. Ferré and Frederick Ferré, "The Theology of Nels F.S. Ferré."
 4. From another source, we learn that the young teenager's brother, who had emigrated to the United States in the previous year, advised Ferré to stay in Sweden. However, after detention on Ellis Island, Ferré was received by his brother in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he earned his keep on a farm. See Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, 39. Ferré records that he was imprisoned on Ellis Island for eleven days owing to unclear immigration documents. See *The Living God of Nowhere and Nothing*, 83.
 5. F. Ferré. "Nels F.S. Ferré on Ultimate Reality," 103.

Ferré's father, whose "deepest longing" was expressed in the song sung by Ferré's brother at their father's funeral, "One day without sin I shall awake",¹ was a biblical literalist, and Ferré recalls in a sermon, "[H]ow desperately I myself fought . . . to retain my own faith in the verbal inspiration of the Bible."² In another sermon, he sums up his progression towards intellectual maturity by saying, "I myself have been converted three times: once to traditional Christianity (I outgrew that conversion); then, in utter despair in my college days, to sheer honesty whatever the cost; and finally to the faith [concerning the truth as it is in Jesus] that I shall recommend to you today."³ Notwithstanding the eventual distance between the father's theology and the son's, Ferré, like his father before him, faithfully maintained family worship: "In our own experience as a family we have lived around the family altar. How good it is to start the day together singing great Christian hymns, reading the Bible together, and praying aloud, one and all, for God's will in the world and for the meeting of our own needs in God's way."⁴ Nor should the influence of Ferré's mother be overlooked. As the train pulled away from the station on the first leg of Ferré's journey from home to the United States, "Mother half ran along the platform and said, 'Nels, remember Jesus; Nels, remember Jesus.'"⁵ Ferré declared that his memory of this event formed "a motivating faith of my life."⁶

As a student, Ferré was influenced by the Boston personalism of Edgar Sheffield Brightman, and, at Harvard, by the process thought of A.N. Whitehead, whose graduate assistant he was. Whilst still a doctoral student, during which period he also served a church and worked "from four-thirty in the morning until eleven at night",⁷ he returned to Sweden, and, under the supervision of Gustav Aulén, he immersed himself in the thought of a number of theologians, notably Anders Nygren, whose exposition of *agape* in the first part of *Agape and Eros* (1932) greatly impressed him.⁸ While, as we shall see, he had reservations concerning some aspects of Nygren's case, *agape* was a recurring theme in his writings.

In 1932, Ferré married Katherine, a native of Boston, and two years later, having concluded that his father's biblicist fundamentalism was untenable, he was ordained a minister of the Congregational

1. Ferré, *God's New Age*, 10.

2. *Ibid.*, 76.

3. *Idem*, *The Extreme Center*, 110-11.

4. *Idem*, *God's New Age*, 133-4.

5. *Ibid.*, 85.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Idem*, *The Extreme Center*, 153.

8. Ferré published his findings on Lundensian theology in *Swedish Contributions to Modern Theology*, and dedicated the book "To the memory of my Father, the Reverend Frans Ferré, for fifty years a minister to Swedish people."

Christian Churches, which body united in 1957 with the Evangelical and Reformed Church to constitute the United Church of Christ. His doctorate gained, and following a brief pastorate, Ferré became Instructor of Philosophy at Andover Newton in 1937. Two years later, he was appointed Abbot Professor of Christian Theology there—a remarkably swift promotion in the oldest seminary in the United States. His reception by academic colleagues was somewhat less than cordial—a fact that Ferré later explained thus: “I felt too free to correct my colleagues. . . . Exploding with ideas, I talked too much. I wanted to be accepted, but the more I tried to prove myself worthy of belonging, the less welcome I was.”¹

In 1950, Ferré removed to Vanderbilt University School of Religion, at a time when that University was making strenuous efforts to gain a leading reputation in theology. Ferré had the confidence of the Vanderbilt President, but, in more conservative quarters, his views met with some opposition—an opposition that his constant flow of writings, some deemed heretical, and his frequently reviled socio-political attitudes did nothing to abate. The anti-communist crusade of Senator Joseph McCarthy was in full spate, and some ministers in the Nashville area accused Ferré of being a communist and an atheist. Again, on arrival at Vanderbilt University at a time when racial prejudice was at its height, he had acted in non-inflammatory ways in a region where aggressive and defensive hackles were easily aroused. In his own words:

When we moved to Tennessee, my wife and I, as Northerners, were ignorant of the racial situation from the inside and wondered just how we were to respond. . . . Friends advised us that it would be impossible to have our home open to Negro visitors, as we had been accustomed in New England. . . . When we first invited Negro friends to meals or entertained them overnight, both the Chancellor of the University and my colleagues warned me. . . . To our joy we saw barriers go down.²

Undeterred by opposition, Ferré continued to write and speak, and as he became ever more widely known, his travels as a visiting professor multiplied. He spent a year at Mansfield College, Oxford (1951-1952) and, as previously mentioned, he was at Hartley Victoria College, Manchester during the academic year 1956-1957.³ In 1961-1962, his lectures took him on a tour that included visits to Japan, the

1. Quoted by Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, 41

2. Ferré, *The Living God of Nowhere and Nothing*, 182-3.

3. In the Preface to *Know Your Faith*, Ferré offers a brief sketch of his visits to Britain; though note that on p. 10 the Welsh town is Newcastle Emlyn, and that the college mentioned on p. 12 is Handsworth.

Philippines, India and Lebanon. Meanwhile, in 1957, he had returned to the Abbot Chair at Andover Newton, where he continued to write and to foment controversy until 1964. The tinder was lit by the appearance of *Christ and the Christian* in 1958. To Ferré's doctrine of the Virgin Birth as expressed here, "orthodox and conservative groups took passionate exception, resorting to campaigns of hostile pamphleteering, and to vilification in newspaper and radio attacks. Speaking invitations were withdrawn, local sponsors lost their jobs, effigies of Ferré were burned and hanged."¹

Feeling somewhat stifled by the theological insularity swirling around him, in 1965, he accepted the post of Scholar-in-Residence at Parsons College, where he enjoyed the freer atmosphere of his undergraduate classes. Further evidence that he was in sympathy with the civil rights movement is clear from his letter to Martin Luther King, written from Parsons College on 7 September 1967:

Dear Martin,

I have been reading *Where Do We Go From Here?* several evenings and am amazed at its wisdom and power. You and your position represent what I consider to be the most important leadership. I am particularly thankful that you include the Vietnam War as a central evil to be opposed. There are no words adequate to the expression of my gratitude for what you are and what you do. You are in my prayers and I want to turn more toward your cause as most worthy of support.

In Christian fellowship,

Nels²

Interestingly, of the sixteen sermons published in *God's New Age* (1962), no fewer than seven refer to the race question, while in six, Ferré expresses his horror of war and his earnest desire for peace among the nations.

When Parsons College lost its accreditation in 1968, Ferré accepted a position at the College of Wooster. Here, as at Parsons, the undergraduates greatly appreciated his teaching, and hundreds of Wooster students attended his funeral in 1971.

For much of his life, Ferré had suffered from most painful arthritis. Throughout, he was lovingly cared for by his wife, who also typed his books. On occasion, his students would carry him from his car to the classroom, and it was his piety that sustained him. But he was "human" too. He had the godly impatience of those who wish things to be other than they are; and his children, recalling his words, "Often I must have

1. F. Ferré, "Nels F.S. Ferré on Ultimate Reality," 105.

2. Manuscript letter at The King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta.

been hard on those who had to wait with me",¹ found them "sadly understated to those of us standing by."² Despite all, "As Ferré loved to sing and to live, 'Faith is the victory that overcomes the world.'"³

II

We have not taken the measure of Ferré until we have reflected further upon what he regarded as of supreme importance: worship and the devotional life. To an unusual degree, his spiritual experiences come to the fore in his scholarly, no less than in his popular, writings. A number of the latter are designed to encourage Christians to deepen their "spiritual life".

During the decades of Ferré's literary activity, there occurred a revival of all things liturgical. This originated on the continent of Europe, whence it percolated into the more receptive circles in Britain and North America. In England, for example, what came to be known as "Genevan" influences found expression in Congregationalism's Church Order Group. The concerns ranged from the propriety of restoring the "full diet" of Word and Sacrament (over against the widespread practice of sharing the Lord's Supper in an "after" service restricted to professed believers—albeit this did make the point that the sacrament was a sacrament of the church, that is, of the gathered, covenanted, saints)—through such issues as the appropriate positioning of the offering (not appended to the notices—it is not a collection to support the events just announced) or the *epiclesis*, to the propriety or otherwise of special clerical dress and the legitimacy of what some deemed to be "liturgical fusspottery". In Ferré's own United Church of Christ, there was, especially among those of its members whose roots were in the German Reformed tradition, a revival of interest in the Mercersburg theology of John Williamson Nevin and Philip Schaff. Interestingly, to judge by his writings, all of this passed Ferré by. Although he has an early chapter entitled "Symbolism and Sacramental Theory,"⁴ which is largely concerned with some of the issues that have divided Christian traditions through history and remain neuralgic in ecumenical discussions to this day, he has very little to say about the nature of the sacraments as such, or the doctrine of covenant that is crucial to the understanding and practice of them. He does not elaborate upon the shape of the liturgy—though he rightly cautions against merely formal worship and perfunctory prayer, seeks integrity and reality in both, and expects that right worship and prayer will propel those who participate in them into society with world-changing effect. This is a

1. Ferré, *Strengthening the Spiritual Life*, 19.

2. F.V. and F. Ferré, "The Theology of Nels F.S. Ferré," 330.

3. *Ibid.*

4. See Ferré, *The Christian Fellowship*, ch. 6.

conviction that is reiterated in many of his books—especially, but by no means only, the one third of them that were written for the edification and encouragement of church members. Indeed, Frederick Ferré wrote of his father, “Theology was to be edifying, not simply scholarly, no matter who the intended reader; and, consequently, even in his most technical books ecstatic passages break forth almost into song, to the astonished embarrassment, I suppose, of the purely professional reader.”¹ In short, this theologian who had so much to say about ultimate reality was no less concerned with religious realities much closer to home—indeed, for him, real religion began precisely in the family home.

Written for a wide readership, *Making Religion Real* was published in 1955.² In my opinion, it is Ferré's best popular work. It is carefully planned, lucid, well written, suitably illustrated and replete with useful guidance. I shall first outline the themes of the first two chapters and then incorporate points from the remainder into paragraphs on worship and prayer, which he treated more widely.

In his opening chapter, “Making Religion Real Through Thinking,” Ferré launches forth from the conviction that “Our basic relation to reality is religion. . . . If religion often is not real to us the reason is that we are not real. We can see neither ourselves nor the world aright, and true seeing is requisite for real being.”³ Accordingly, we need the directed mind. Through religious thinking we become aware of our own condition, and learn how to pass from it to right religion. “Our lives,” he declares, “are the way we think in our hearts.”⁴ While some minds are dogmatic, others drift, but “To think religiously is to steer by the starry heavens and the shining sun. . . . Faith, hope and love abide, for they are heavenly stars dependable in their courses.”⁵ God is love and “the ever-faithful director both of life as a whole and of all our lives together.”⁶ Turning from nautical images to photographic ones, Ferré advises, “If we are to see rightly we must have our lives focused for distance Religion deals with things eternal . . . [and] the thinking mind adjusted to religious distance lives . . . by faith.”⁷ The focused mind sees things as they are, and not all are worth seeing, hence, “The Bible's own advice is to think on whatever is true, right, pure and of good report.”⁸ In addition to the directed and the focused mind, we also need the dedicated mind,

1. F. Ferré, “Toward Transformational Theology,” 13.

2. I refer to the English edition of 1956.

3. Ferré, *Reason in Religion*, 9, 11.

4. *Ibid.*, 13.

5. *Ibid.*, 15-16.

6. *Ibid.*, 17.

7. *Ibid.*, 18-19.

8. *Ibid.*, 24.

and here Jesus is the exemplar. Such a mind is a free mind, because its only allegiance is to “a will to truth. It has made its decision for integrity;”¹ but “the path of truth is also the path of love”² and thus the dedicated mind is alive to the need of others and to the world’s decisive issues.

The second chapter is entitled, “Making Religion Real Through Reading.” Ferré decrees that what, how and why we read is indicative of our world view and ultimate values. “Only that is good religious reading,” he continues, “which helps to make religion more real.”³ Christians do well to have variety in their reading: novels, poetry, drama, biography, as well as journals representative of many points of view: “We have to know the actual world in which we live.”⁴ Among religious journals he recommends are *The Christian Century* [Christian centrists applaud] and *The Hibbert Journal* [fundamentalists scowl]. It is good practice to read slowly and meditatively, but general reading alone will not suffice. Perhaps somewhat over-optimistically in view of the wide readership he envisages, he presents a curriculum including Francis de Sales, Jakob Boehme, St John of the Cross, William Law and Søren Kierkegaard, not to mention Chinese, Indian and Islamic texts. Above all, “Reading in theology should define clearly man’s questions as to the meaning of his life as seen in the light of God.”⁵ More particularly, “No theology is true unless it answers basically the problem of evil, which is, after all, our only problem.”⁶ Having recommended that we discuss our reading with our friends, he comes finally to the Bible, which he describes as “the standard for Christian thought.”⁷ He offers guidance to how it may be read, and recommends a devotional approach to it.

I shall now turn to some of Ferré’s general ideas on worship and prayer, and then outline his understanding of personal, family and churchly devotions.

Worship and prayer belong to the life of the spirit, and Ferré believes that “Unless our life of the spirit is strengthened we have no real hope.”⁸ “Worship,” he declares, “is based on the recognition

1. Ibid., 32.

2. Ibid., 33.

3. Ibid., 36.

4. Ibid., 41.

5. Ibid., 51.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 53.

8. Idem, *Strengthening the Spiritual Life*, 9. Though with brash salesmen-and-women of the current “gospel of prosperity” currently all around us, I could wish that he had not entitled his first chapter “A Formula for Spiritual Success.” He was, of course, spared the perversion of the gospel to which I refer.

of the moral worthiness of its object. Unless there is in the universe a power at least as good as man's highest relevant ideal, there is nothing to worship."¹ More specifically:

Central to the Christian life is worship. Worship is not work; worship is not thought; worship is not ritual. Worship is walking with God. It is our direct communication with God. . . . The center of Christian life is worship. The center of worship, however, is adoration, gratitude. Adoration really proves whether God is all worthy to us. Worship is worthship.²

This is why he says, "Religion can never become real apart from worship, for without it religion cannot be right."³ Worship "is the barring of one's whole life unto God. . . . To worship is to be gripped by God. . . . [It] is the living in and by eternity."⁴ He lands a well-judged blow on Martin Buber, celebrated for his untenable disjunction of "belief in" from "belief that": "Martin Buber contends that faith is lost and turned into a philosophy when we believe that God has done something instead of believing in God. Because God has done something we now have a way to worship Him",⁵ and we must remember that "Worship is both drama and participation. God always plays the main part but no man is allowed to be a mere spectator."⁶ Worship is practical too: "Worship . . . helps us see ourselves as we are and to see things as they are."⁷ It "is man's most important work,"⁸ and as we wait upon God, so we must also patiently wait for him. Such waiting "is victorious waiting because though our warfare seems constant the outcome is certain."⁹

Ferré was deeply grieved by what he saw as the paucity of genuine worship and prayer: "Prayer is exposing one's life to the light of God. Worship is the sensitising of the spirit to divine reality."¹⁰ "We worship the power line of salvation, but do not dare to connect it to our own lives."¹¹ In still more homely fashion, he observes, "we have never prayed perseveringly for Christ's sake. . . . We have assumed God's door to be locked without even trying the knob."¹² Even "The church that was born to bless stands pretty much with empty hands. It has lost

1. Idem, *The Christian Faith*, 6.

2. Idem, *Pillars of Faith*, 120, 122.

3. Idem, *Making Religion Real*, 84.

4. Idem, *Strengthening the Spiritual Life*, 11.

5. Idem, *Making Religion Real*, 91-92.

6. Ibid., 93.

7. Idem, *Strengthening the Spiritual Life*, 13.

8. Ibid., 18.

9. Ibid., 22.

10. Idem, *Making Religion Real*, 21.

11. Idem, *The Living God of Nowhere and Nothing*, 51.

12. Idem, *The Christian Faith*, 141.

heart."¹ Nevertheless, "We need the church to lead us toward spiritual renewal, but first the church itself must experience a new Pentecost."² Sadly, "Emphasis on the Spirit in salvation and sanctification apart from man's total life in society and nature becomes false pietism."³ What we need is worship that sets before us "a Lord of history active among men. Too much of worship assumes that God is dead!"⁴ By contrast, "When witnessing is first by being and then by doing, our saying also becomes genuine."⁵

In discoursing on prayer in general, Ferré is not ordinarily as tantalizing (or as, at least partially, opaque) as when he writes, "Prayer force is the inner core of ultimate reality, our relation with God in the eternal dimension."⁶ More readily graspable by those who have a smattering of the language of Canaan is this: "Prayer is the opening of one's life to the Spirit who can convict, convince, and even convert the self, who can make him into a new creature."⁷ It is "entering the life of God by the power and reality of the Holy Spirit."⁸ Yet again, "Prayer is basically our resting in God . . . the power of God's presence for the world in the midst of its turmoils."⁹ It may even be said that "The power of true prayer is explosive."¹⁰ Most fundamentally of all, "Christian prayer centers in God's self-revelation as Holy Trinity. . . . [It] is not so much a human act as it is God's gift."¹¹ "[It is] from and to God through Christ in the Holy Spirit."¹²

Christian prayer presupposes the fact of the living God who is faithful and answers prayer. Thus Ferré introduces *A Theology for Christian Prayer* (1963)—his fullest account of the matter. He notes that prayer is a feature of the life of human beings as such; he notes that the ministry of Jesus was surrounded by prayer, and that Pentecost came in response to prayer, and he argues that Christian prayer is both "an external act of communication and an inner act of communion."¹³ In either case, it is "Through God's self-revelation in Christ as Holy Love" that "we know the God who answers prayer. . . . God is *Agape*, the unconditional, all-out Love that we can understand best at the Cross."¹⁴

1. Idem, *Strengthening the Spiritual Life*, 10.
2. Idem, *Toward Spiritual Renewal*, 3.
3. Ibid., 4.
4. Idem, *Making Religion Real*, 91.
5. Idem, *Toward Spiritual Renewal*, 8.
6. Idem, *Christianity and Society*, 26.
7. Idem, *The Living God of Nowhere and Nothing*, 179.
8. Ibid., 127.
9. Idem, *God's New Age*, 130.
10. Ibid., 17.
11. Idem, *A Theology for Christian Prayer*, 10.
12. Ibid., 39.
13. Ibid., 30.
14. Ibid., 33.

Christian prayer presupposes also a personal relationship with God, and this is not something that God forces upon us: “[He] has put us out of our safe nest and lets us try our wings.”¹ We are free persons, and “God will not enter into relation with us until we invite Him.”² Here we have a way of speaking that parallels Ferré’s remarks along the lines of, “God will save you if you let him.” I shall return to this matter in due course, but, for the present, I observe in passing that God does not simply wait for us to act; he reaches out—even pursues us—with prevenient grace. We are called into union with the risen Christ; it is not simply that we decide to opt in his direction. Our repentance, faith and surrender are truly ours, but they are enabled by the grace that makes us *willing*.³ It is by this route that “The new being establishes a new relation to God, and this new relation becomes a new channel for God’s own work.”⁴

Ferré reflects upon a number of the parts of prayer: adoration, thanksgiving (“Thankfulness is the thermometer of Christian prayer. It is the barometer of our inward weather,”⁵), confession, petition and intercession, and he also questions the propriety of praying to Jesus: “We must not pray to man but to God, and we must not sunder the humanity of Jesus from our common humanity. . . . Worshipping Jesus as God . . . puts him conveniently out of our class . . . then we can be thankful for both his life and his work without their having direct relevance to our own lives.”⁶ There is no excuse for the attitude here described; but I am concerned by the ambiguity of “common”. If “common humanity” in this context means “shared humanity” then of course we share humanity with Jesus, and we must beware of docetism and idolatry. But if “common humanity” means “humanity as generally experienced” then the sinless Jesus, as Godman, or Proper Man, stands for humanity as it should be and in everyone else is not. Moreover, if we may not distinguish the persons of the Trinity in a tritheistic or modalistic manner, then in addressing *God* the Son, or *God* the Holy Spirit, in prayer, are we not addressing the one God?

1. *Ibid.*, 34.

2. *Ibid.*, 35.

3. I was once channel-hopping among the more or less disturbing religious programmes to be found on television. I landed in the middle of an evangelist’s sermon. I do not know his name, but, interestingly and rather refreshingly for one of his ilk, he put things in the opposite way to Ferré. “I’m sick and tired of hearing evangelists say, ‘Will you ask Jesus to come into your life?’ Why would Jesus want to come into your life—it’s a mess! Jesus invites us to share his life.”

4. Ferré, *A Theology for Christian Prayer*, 36.

5. *Ibid.*, 53.

6. *Idem*, *The Living God of Nowhere and Nothing*, 47-48.

Against this general background, I turn to the importance Ferré attached to personal prayer. "Real prayer," he declares, "never takes place unless we first realise who God is, the ever-faithful."¹ Of the importance of prayer, Ferré has no doubt: "God Himself has made prayer the way to His own presence."² Unsurprisingly, therefore, "Prayer is the main highway to making religion real;"³ but Ferré acknowledges that "Prayer as communion with God, the center of life, can never be mastered easily."⁴ He therefore offers guidance that he has himself found beneficial. The first thing is to "Stop saying prayers and begin to pray."⁵ Those who would pray are advised to learn the habit of relaxation; to recollect who God is, that his love is all-embracing, and that he is ever ready to forgive. "Prayer is communion. At times it consists in talking with God. But much communion ought to be spent in silence."⁶ Prayers should be characterized by adoration and gratitude and, interestingly, "We may often speak with spontaneous tongues, but in general there ought to be decency and order even in personal prayer life."⁷ We should branch out in our prayers and intercede for family, friends, the several branches of the church, missionaries and those who live "behind the so-called Iron Curtain [and] for the United Nations."⁸ Ferré is not above personal testimony: "Increasingly I learn that prayer is my most important occupation. Prayer is the work I do that lasts longest and produces the most good results."⁹ Again, "During years of sickness when I could not sleep for pain, I discovered the joy and strength of praying at night. . . . Too weary to struggle, throwing my spent self on the Holy Spirit, I experienced real rest and an unmistakable inflow of power."¹⁰ We should pray at various times of day and live in a constant atmosphere of communion with God. He suggests that "we may begin to hear almost constant voices," but cautions that these need to be tested; they are not final authorities, and we should not talk about them. Nor should we depend upon our feelings, for it may be that when we are at our weakest, "God is doing the most" through us.¹¹ We fail in prayer if our prayers revolve around ourselves; they may even "become means for blowing up our egos and for bolstering our spirits."¹² Rather, we should seek the mind of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit when we

1. Idem, *Making Religion Real*, 73.

2. Ibid., 61.

3. Ibid., 59.

4. Idem, *Strengthening the Spiritual Life*, 24.

5. Idem, *Toward Spiritual Renewal*, 6.

6. Idem, *Strengthening the Spiritual Life*, 29.

7. Ibid., 30.

8. Ibid., 33.

9. Idem, *God's New Age*, 18.

10. Idem, *Strengthening the Spiritual Life*, 33.

11. Ibid., 35.

12. Idem, *Making Religion Real*, 75.

pray. Our manner should be humble, and, "If you face failure and death, testify through both to God's total victory."¹ In a reversal of Benedict's motto, "*Laborare est orare*", Ferré insists that prayer is not a substitute for work: "God gives us the gold mines, but we must work out the gold for ourselves."² The upshot is that "Neither crowd nor community can take the place of the closed closet, the early morning watches, the daily commitment and worship, the individual prayer without ceasing."³

In his discussion of spiritual renewal, Ferré makes it clear that this begins in the home. When sketching his life, I noted the importance he attached to family devotions, and now we may hear his own words on the subject:

In the family in which I was brought up the worship of God was central. My parents perhaps had many failings, but they never failed us in the seriousness with which they took family worship. . . . In our own experience as a family we have lived around the family altar. How good it is to start the day together singing great Christian hymns, reading the Bible together, and praying aloud, one and all, for God's will in the world and for the meeting of our own needs in God's way.⁴

"[F]amily devotions," he declares, "are the most important part of family life,"⁵ and nothing should be allowed to stand in their way. If people plead that there is no time, "Families can get up half an hour earlier. . . . So wake the sleepy boy! Shake the drowsy girl!" Like others before him, Ferré thinks of the family as a little church. The content of family prayers should be varied in accordance with the several age ranges represented, and all should be invited to participate, as they are able, by playing instruments, reading and offering prayers. Why is all of this so important? Because "Each family has its primary and main task to glorify God and to hasten the coming of His Kingdom."⁶ So to Ferré's challenge: "Will you let God renew his church and help to turn world history through your family? Don't keep the Father waiting. Bless him now by your firm and lasting decision."⁷

Ferré's challenge is prompted by his conviction that "Family prayers will . . . be part of the Church's life. The Church of the Living God cannot have families in which the faith is not alive. . . . Not only do members of the Church of the Living God seek to pray as families, but

1. *Ibid.*, 36.

2. *Idem*, *God's New Age*, 24.

3. *Idem*, *The Sun and the Umbrella*, 62. Cf. *Christianity and Society*, 166.

4. *Idem*, *Towards Spiritual Renewal*, 12-13.

5. *Idem*, *Strengthening the Spiritual Life*, 42.

6. *Ibid.*, 48.

7. *Idem*, *Toward Spiritual Renewal*, 15.

also the families come together corporately for prayer."¹ Corporate worship is the work of all, and "You cannot make the minister a prima donna and expect a strong church."² Christ is the Head of the Church, and the Holy Spirit is its power: "Let us wait in trust for the Holy Spirit to empower us in life and teaching. Let the Word and Sacrament no longer be rites to dull the Spirit [*sic*] but celebrations of the living Christ within the presence and power of the Holy Spirit."³ Ferré laments the passing of the prayer meeting from most churches, but thinks that small groups for study, prayer, discipline and mutual testimony must nevertheless be nurtured within the larger fellowship. He cites the Methodist Class Meeting as an example to be emulated.⁴ Ferré's hopes are high: "A Church based on prayer in the Living God cannot help becoming an evangel [ist?], the proclaimer of the Gospel through its very community and through the natural outreach of its members."⁵ "Prophetic preaching is wholesome," he declares, "and preparatory to evangelism;" and "Through the Sacraments we celebrate at the deeper levels of experience the central facts of the fellowship of forgiveness."⁶ But all of this is to the end that the world be reached with the gospel of God's love:

A new age is here for our receiving it. It must be built on the Eternal Love as the foundation, and held strong and steady on the full five pillars of faith: Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Church, the Bible, and Christian experience. If we build in this way, we shall not only believe and work, but believe and work to the fullest possible advantage.⁷

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1. Idem, *The Sun and the Umbrella*, 89.
 2. Idem, *Strengthening the Spiritual Life*, 19.
 3. Idem, *Toward Spiritual Renewal*, 18. Cf. *A Theology for Christian Prayer*, 44-47.
 4. Idem, *Toward Spiritual Renewal*, 19. Cf. *The Sun and the Umbrella*, 90.
 5. Idem, *The Sun and the Umbrella*, 90.
 6. Idem, *The Christian Faith*, 212-13.
 7. Idem, *Pillars of Faith*, 124.