

Reader's reactions

Michel Quoist

Prayers of Life

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Over the forty years I have been preparing and leading worship, I have been influenced by many books from many sources. There was the worship material of Edmund Jones from Queen's Cross Aberdeen and Gordon Simpson from Currie Kirk in Edinburgh which was formative and enlivening for a young divinity student and fresh-faced minister in the 1970s. There were books of prayers and reflective material, such as *Words for Living* by Douglas Aitken from the 1980s, a compilation of his Radio Scotland meditations and reflections which I've always found moving and relevant. And there has always been the hymn-writing of John Bell, with his important use of accessible language and contemporary images.

But the book which had the most important influence on me was *Prayers for Life* by Michel Quoist. A slim volume of about 130 pages, it has been a constant companion since I first discovered it in the late 1960s. I've worn out several copies over the years. I've given countless other copies to people as gifts. Because, when I read *Prayers for Life* all these years ago, it simply blew me away.

Michel Quoist was a French pastor from the worker-priest movement who worked as a parish priest in a poverty-stricken quarter of Le Havre. His work with the destitute poor and the



alienated youth of the city changed Quoist's ministry, altered his approach to worship and transformed his use of imagery and language in his prayers.

One of the sections of the book is entitled "All of life would become a prayer". And all of life is in Quoist's writing in a graphic and passionate way. For here you have *A prayer before a five-pound note* in which he lays before God the heavy burden of responsibility he feels about using his money in a right way; *To love – the prayer of the adolescent* where, understanding the mind of a young person, he has them voice a prayer of yearning for love and acceptance; *That face, Lord, haunts me* in which he reflects on the people he sees around him and the haunting he feels as he realises he can't do all he would like to do for them.

But perhaps the most influential prayer for me – not only for my understanding of worship but in my struggles with ministry – is entitled *Lord, why did you tell me to love?* As a priest, Quoist reflects with heart-rending honesty on the cost of loving as Christ loved. Michel Quoist was praying my prayer without me knowing it was a prayer I needed to offer honestly to my God.

Here's an extract:

As soon as I started to open the door I saw them, with outstretched hands, burning eyes, longing hearts, like beggars on church steps. The first ones came in, Lord. There was after all some space in my heart. I welcomed them. I would have cared for them and fondled them, my very own little lambs, my little flock. You would have been pleased, Lord, I would have served and honoured you in a proper, respectable way. Till then, it was sensible... But the next ones, Lord, the other men, I had not seen them; they were hidden behind the first ones. There were more of them, they were wretched; they over-powered me without warning. We had to crowd in, I had to find room for them. Now they have come from all over, in successive waves, pushing one another, jostling one another...

They drag the world behind them, with everything rusted, twisted, or badly adjusted. Lord, they hurt me! They are in the way, they are everywhere. They are too hungry, they are consuming me! I can't do anything anymore; as they come in, they push the door, and the door



opens wider... Lord! My door is wide open! I can't stand it anymore! It's too much! It's no kind of life! What about my job? My family? My peace? My liberty? And me? Lord, I have lost everything, I don't belong to myself any longer; There's no more room for me at home.

Don't worry, God says, you have gained all. While men came in to you, I, your Father, I, your God, slipped in among them.

Here was a circumstance which was mine. Here was imagery I understood. Here was language I could relate to. Here was a dialogue with God which was honest, and real, and painful, and healing, and relevant. Here was prayer as I wanted to pray.

I have led countless acts of worship over my forty years of ministry. I have written a great deal for worship over these years, and now give my time to further writing for worship and personal reflection. I hope that, in a very small way, having been influenced so profoundly by Michel Quoist's Prayers of Life, I can offer similar insights, through words and images, which will be helpful to other people.

I will never be a Michel Quoist. But I hope that, like him, I can continue to be honest and real, open and relevant in the prayers I use and offer others for their use, both personally and as an aid to worship. After all, we're all hoping that "all of life would become prayer", aren't we?

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.



Additional Resources

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Music Resources

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Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

