

CHRIST AND PRAYER

By Philip Gerrard

INTRODUCTION

The most important thing in our lives is how we stand in relation to God. God is the only perfect judge of our value because He is the only one Who sees everything in its true light. He sees us as we really are, with all the failings and imperfections which we take good care to hide from those around us. Our real worth therefore is determined by how we stand in God's eyes.

This is not the way the present day world judges a man's value. For the twentieth century, having thrown aside all idea of the supernatural, has become accustomed to regard everything from the material standpoint. It is not surprising then, that when the world is assessing the worth of a person it takes as standards those things which, being material, have little or no connection with God or the Soul of man as, for example, money, social standing, physical powers.

Affected in so many ways by this spirit of materialism, our own judgment is easily warped. We follow the example of the world, and we, too, lose the balance between the natural and the supernatural. This mistaken outlook affects our life so that we find it hard to live as true Christians. We are satisfied to *render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's*, but too often fail to *render to God the things that are God's*.

How, then, are we to live so as to be always pleasing to our Creator? The answer to this question is found in the life of Christ because *He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life*. God became man, *in all things like to us except in Sin*, to show us in the clearest possible way how we are to live if we wish to please Him. Our Lord is our model in all our activities, amongst which the most important is Prayer. It is by Prayer that man grows in his knowledge and love of God. It is by Prayer that man fulfills the duty of thanking God for His benefits and of praising Him. It is by prayer that man keeps in touch with the supernatural order from which he derives his true life, the life of Grace. Our prayer is of the utmost importance because it is the surest indication of how we stand in relation to God.

In forming our ideas about Prayer it is necessary to learn from Christ. This we can do in two ways, either by studying His teachings, as for example, the Our Father, which He taught His Apostles when they asked Him how to pray. On the other hand, we can learn from His example. We can study His life and actions and see when and under what circumstances Our Lord prayed. We can learn the qualities that our prayer should have by watching Christ as He prays and by trying to discover as far as we can how He went about praying. From the pages of the Gospels we can also discover the reasons which prompted Our Saviour to converse with His Heavenly Father.

According to these three divisions we shall treat of Christ's example in prayer, seeing in the first place WHEN He prayed; secondly, HOW He prayed, and thirdly, WHY He prayed.

When Did Christ Pray?

Prayer may be considered in two ways. In a broad sense to pray means to act in accordance with the will of God in order to please Him. When in the morning offering we offer to God all our thoughts, words and actions, we sanctify our everyday life by raising it to the level of a prayer. During the day when we do whatever God wants us to do we are pleasing to Him and we fulfil our Lord's command, *You ought always to Pray*.

In its strict and ordinary meaning, prayer is *the intercourse of the Child of God with its Heavenly Father*. To pray is to speak to God, to put aside other activities and to turn one's thoughts and desires to Heaven. The great St. Theresa, who was so experienced in prayer, writes that, *Prayer is a communion alone with God so as to express our love to Him, by whom we know ourselves to be loved*.

Taking prayer in its broad sense as being the offering to God of one's actions, we may say that Christ's life was a perfect prayer. From His youth, which He spent in helping His foster father, and throughout His public life until His death, our Lord lived every moment and offered every action for His Father's glory. It was His constant rule and the

means by which He sanctified His life, to do the will of His Father. *What pleases Him I always do.* At His birth, lying helpless in the manger, His little lips could not move, but the angels who surrounded the cave prayed in His name. Their prayer was one of praise and glory to God in the highest. They knew the reason for the Son of God becoming Man, and in their hymn on the morning of Christ's birth they reflected the depths of His Soul and foreshadowed the spirit that would inspire His whole life.

When Jesus was twelve years old the Holy Family went to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of the Passover. It was on their return journey with the large band of pilgrims from Galilee that Mary and Joseph discovered that Jesus was missing. Going back to Jerusalem in great distress they searched among their friends for the Child, and it was only after three days that they found Him. *seated in the Temple in the midst of the Doctors, both hearing them and asking them questions.* Even though she was amazed at this scene, our Lady did not forget the anxiety she had suffered during those days. She said: *My Son, why hast Thou done so to us? Your father and I have sought you with sorrow.* The reply which Jesus made to His mother is the first sentence of Our Saviour recorded in the Gospels. His thoughts were already fixed on His true Father in Heaven, and the desire to do His Father's will was the key to His actions. *Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?* Do you not realise, He says, that I have only one purpose in all My actions, and that is to please My Father. Do you not understand that My whole life is set aside for this, and even though at times it may cause a sword of sorrow to pierce your heart, still I shall do only what My Father wishes. From His earliest youth, therefore, Christ sanctified His life by consecrating it to God.

The little that we know about His hidden life in Nazareth bears out just as clearly that our Lord made a prayer of every action. After He was found teaching the doctors in the temple, *Jesus went down to Nazareth with His parents; there He was subject to them, and He increased in Wisdom, in age, and in grace before God and before men.* Jesus was subject to Mary and Joseph. They were the superiors whom God had appointed over Him, and in their will He saw the will of His Father. Jesus knew that by subjecting Himself to Mary, His Mother, and Saint Joseph, and by pleasing them He was at the same time pleasing His Heavenly Father.

During His public life, and especially during the Passion, this ready acceptance of His Father's will is ever in His mind: *My meat is to do the will of Him who sent me.* As our study of Christ's prayer proceeds, we shall see that this is at the heart of all His intercourse with God. By instructing the people, by healing the sick, and by preparing the foundations of the Church, Christ carried out from day to day the work which His Father had given Him to do. He consecrated His life to God, *He became obedient even unto death,* and by His loving acceptance of all His sorrows His every act was sanctified and became a perfect prayer.

Besides this constant directing of His actions according to His Father's pleasure, there were many times in our Lord's life when He raised His heart to heaven in intimate converse, and when He turned aside from His preaching and devoted Himself to silent prayer. Throughout the Gospels we find many instances of Christ retiring alone to the mountains in order to pray. In the first chapter of St. Mark's Gospel we read that shortly after He began His public mission *Christ rose up one morning before daybreak and departed into a solitary place, and there He prayed.* St. Luke describes the same incident, and then later on in 5-16 tells how *Christ withdrew Himself into the wilderness and prayed.* In two other places, 9-11 and 11-1, St. Luke refers to this habit of quiet prayer. St. Mark in 6-46, after describing how our Lord fed the multitude, relates that *He sent His disciples away and then He departed into a mountain to pray,* and St. Matt. adds, *when evening was come He was there alone.*

The Apostles, therefore, were accustomed to their Master retiring frequently to some lonely place. He would leave the excited crowds wondering at His miracles of healing and slip away quietly to some remote place where He would be alone with His Father. In the evenings especially this was His practice to retire by Himself, and when He was in Jerusalem He used to go to Mount Olivet. St. Luke records that after the Last Supper *Christ came out and went as He was accustomed to the Mount of Olives and when He was withdrawn from them a stone's throw He kneeled down and prayed.*

Besides these frequent occasions when Our Lord went by Himself to pray, we find Him speaking to His Heavenly Father before each important work He undertook. At the beginning of His public life He called together the men who were

to help in His work of preaching. Of these disciples, He chose twelve to be more intimately associated with Him and later on to be His Apostles. These twelve men He was going to instruct with special care, and upon one of them, as upon a rock, He was to build His Church. It was important, then, that the right men should be chosen, for this was the beginning of the Church. On the evening before His final decision, Christ had recourse to prayer. As St. Luke tells us, *Christ went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in the prayer of God. When it was day He called His disciples, and of them He chose twelve, whom also He named Apostles.*

The miracles which Christ performed are an important and integral part of the story of His public life. He went about Palestine doing good by healing the sick as well as by preaching His Gospel of love. Not only did the poor have the Kingdom of God preached to them, but the blind saw, the lame walked, and the deaf were given their hearing. Our Lord used His miracles to show the people His divine power, and to win their attention so that they would listen to His teaching. They were also a means of bringing the people around Him, for the fame of these wonderful happenings preceded His journeys. Hence they were so valuable and important to His ministry.

Before these miracles, Christ often prayed and asked His Father to direct the work He was about to do. They are further illustrations of how He consecrated His actions by referring them to His Heavenly Father.

Apart from His Glorious Resurrection, the raising of Lazarus from the dead is the most striking miracle in Our Lord's life.

It was because of the sensation that this miracle caused among the people, who could not fail to see in it a, heavenly seal on the truth of His claims, that the Jewish Priests finally decided to put Our Lord to death. Christ loved Lazarus and his two sisters, and took a special interest in them, so it is not surprising to find that when Lazarus fell sick, the first person whom Martha and Mary thought of was Jesus. They sent a messenger at once to tell Him what had happened, but when our Lord arrived at Bethany Lazarus was already dead and buried. His sympathy went out to the sorrowing sisters, and He, too, began to weep because His friend was dead. Jesus asked that the stone covering the tomb should be taken away, and then He raised His eyes to Heaven and said: *Father, I give thanks that Thou hast heard me. Yet I know that Thou hearest me always; but because of the people who stand around I spoke that they may believe that Thou hast sent me.*

This is an example of how Christ always had recourse to prayer. On this occasion His prayer was one of thanks-giving to His Father for the favour that was to be given through His power to Martha and Mary. It was a prayer of confidence—confidence in God's goodness, and another illustration of how His will was perfectly attuned to that of His Heavenly Father. Above all, His prayer before the tomb of Lazarus was for the benefit of the people who were witnessing the miracle, and for us, who after so many centuries can listen to Christ and learn from Him how we should turn our eyes to Heaven whenever we are about to begin an important task.

An incident in Our Lord's life of greater importance for the Apostles who were present was the Transfiguration. The three in whom Jesus showed a special interest were Peter, James, and John, for it was they whom He was to bring into the Garden to witness His Agony, and one of them, His beloved disciple, was to accompany Him to Calvary and remain beside Mary at the foot of the Cross. Peter, James and John, therefore, needed special graces to strengthen them in their work, so on this occasion Our Lord gave them an opportunity to see Him in His power and glory.

At the Transfiguration, Christ chose to display His glory while at prayer. In the words of St. Luke, *He took Peter, James and John and went up into a mountain to pray. As He prayed the appearance of His countenance was changed and His raiment became a radiant white.* He wished to link up the two ideas of happiness and prayer in the minds of His Apostles. On another occasion they were to see Him praying while suffering His agony in the garden of olives, so now He strengthened them by displaying His glory while at the same time He prayed. In this they had a further proof that Christ's mind was always occupied in prayer, and that He did not undertake any work without referring it to His Heavenly Father.

When Our Lord worked His miracle of feeding the multitude with a few loaves and fishes, He set before us yet another example of this constant intercourse with His Father. Each of the Evangelists refers to this prayer; Mark and John record that *Christ gave thanks before He broke and distributed the bread.* Matthew and Luke, using almost the same words, tell

how *Jesus took the five loaves and two fishes, and, looking up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to His disciples.*

It was then that Christ promised to institute the Eucharist—to give His own body and blood to be the living food and drink for those who would believe in Him. Some time later, after the Last Supper, He fulfilled that promise and commanded the Apostles to do what He had done, i.e., to change bread and wine into His body and blood. That evening His passion was about to begin, and as He sat at the table with His Apostles for the last time, His prayer took on a more impressive tone. In the next section we shall see how He opened His heart to God and how He begged His Father's help for the Apostles. What concerns us here is the fact that *OUR LORD DID PRAY AT THIS TIME.*

For many years He had been looking forward to these days, and now that the time had arrived and His sufferings in all their terror began to appear before Him, it would have seemed natural for Our Lord to hesitate. But the peace of His Soul was not disturbed. Whenever He had a difficult task to perform during His life, He always turned to prayer, and now, as He is about to take on Himself the sufferings by which He was to atone for the sins of the world, Christ prepares Himself in the same way. St. John relates in detail what Our Lord said on this occasion. Again, by His example, He impresses on those around Him the necessity of turning to God; and the Apostles, seeing the consolation Jesus derived from His prayer, would not easily have forgotten the lesson.

Having described Our Lord's prayer, St. John goes on to say, *Jesus went forth with His disciples beyond the brook of Cedron, where there was a garden into which He and His disciples entered . . . Jesus took with Him the three who had witnessed His Transfiguration . . . and when He had withdrawn from them about a stone's throw He knelt down and began to pray.* It was then that His agony became so intense that His sweat became as drops of blood. All this time, when the sins of the world were weighing heavily upon His shoulders, Christ continued in prayer, submitting Himself to His Father's will, and when the suffering increased *He prayed more earnestly.*

So did Our Lord's Passion begin, and so it continued until the price of our salvation had been paid. Even when He was nailed to the cross and about to complete the sacrifice of His life, the suffering He was enduring could not turn His mind from prayer, for the words of the Psalms were on His lips. Christ prayed for those who had treated Him so cruelly. *Father, forgive them for they know not what they do;* and then as He was about to die, He said. *Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit.*

How Did Christ Pray

It is clear from what has gone before that Christ was constantly referring His actions to God, thinking of His Father's will, pausing to thank His Father for hearing His requests, and then frequently setting aside all other activities and depriving Himself of the company of His friends to devote His whole mind and heart to God. In doing this, He allowed no opportunity to pass without impressing on the Apostles that they should begin their work in the spirit of prayer, of obedience to God's will, and of thanksgiving for His benefits.

How did Christ pray? What did He do during those long silent vigils when the people in the villages were excitedly examining the cures He had done during the day and the Apostles were discussing His doctrines? What was the central point, or the main theme of His prayers? These are the questions that come to mind as we follow Him on His journeys through Galilee and listen to Him as He teaches the people who crowd around Him; or as we go with Him, even if it is only to spend an hour, to those quiet places among the hills. These are the questions we shall try to answer now, and even if we do not succeed in penetrating the depths of this Divine Personality, our search will lead us towards the main-spring of that activity which directed the life and actions of God-made-Man. Our search will lead us to the centre of Christ's prayer, to the principal lesson which He wishes us to learn from His example and will help us to improve our own intimacy with God.

It is so important to pray well in these days when all the forces of a Godless world are bent on breaking this vital link with the source of our spiritual strength. Because that is what prayer is—the main line of communication between God and man, a channel down which God pours His graces to strengthen us, the life-line by which we are ever striving to bring

ourselves closer to happiness and Heaven.

In setting out to discover how Christ prayed, it is necessary to examine the relation that existed between Him and the Being to Whom His prayer was directed. For in studying Our Lord's prayer we must enter into those relations, mysterious for the most part, which began when the Word was made Flesh.

Christ was the Son of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity become Man, and this great truth upon which our religion is based is naturally at the centre of Christ's intercourse with His Father. The Truth, which came into being at the Annunciation when Mary said, *Be it done unto me according to Thy word*, was Christ in Whom there are united two distinct elements, Divinity and Humanity. To understand how our Lord prayed, it is necessary to have clearly in mind that He is God and that He is man.

From this second point, viz., that Christ is man, it follows that it is possible for Him to act in a human way, as other men act. We have the power to speak to God because we are men. Christ was a man as really as we are; therefore, He, too, was able to speak to God. But whereas we are human persons having each of us the same human nature, our Lord is a Divine Person possessing Divine as well as human nature. In His Person the two natures did not fuse so as to form a middle nature, neither Divine nor human, but the two remained complete and distinct. Christ, a Divine Person, could act in a Divine way, and in a human way; and in so far as He was human, He could raise His mind and heart to God.

The other great truth on which the prayer of Christ depended, was His Divinity. Christ, the man, was a Divine Person, the Second Person of the Trinity—united to His Heavenly Father by a union which is unique—a union in nature by which He and the Father were one. He was the Son of God, equal to the Father, and as a result His intercourse with His Father was one of unrivalled unity. *I and the Father are One*, Our Lord said to the Jews, and during those long nights and on the frequent occasions when He set aside all other activity to give Himself to prayer, it was this union that flooded His Soul with light. It was this union that shone during His prayer at the Transfiguration—it was this union that strengthened and consoled Him in His agony; in a word the deepest element in the prayer of our Saviour was the experience and realisation of an essential unity and an absolutely unique sonship.

It is clear, therefore, that the essence of Christ's prayer was His oneness with the Father. It was the power strengthening His active life; the centre from which radiated the goodness, gentleness, the strength and perseverance, the loving interest, the self-sacrificing toil, the whole greatness of His perfect character. His humanity was united to His Divinity and drawn into unity with God.

The realisation of this unity, the foundation on which Jesus built His prayer, was accompanied and perfected by love. Knowledge gives rise to love, and the more intimate our knowledge of a subject the greater is our love for it. The love of the Son of God for His Father was perfect to a degree far surpassing our understanding because this love was the result of perfect knowledge. *No one knows who the Father is but the Son*, implies what is equally true, viz., *That no one loves the Father as the Son*.

This intense love flowing from Christ's knowledge was also the perfection and summit of His prayer. Because of His union with the Divinity, Our Lord, in His human nature, enjoyed the Beatific Vision. His gaze fell directly and constantly on the beauty of the Trinity, and this vision, the beginning and end of all human life, and at the same time the true source of happiness, filled His Soul with complete joy. It was an absorbing love that lifted Him *out of the monotony of His hidden life, separated Him from the companionship of men who saw and could see nothing, whose horizon was confined to the rough village street that crawled up that hillside. It was this that lifted Him above the coarse familiarities, the boorish manner, the galling condescensions that filled the greater part of His life*.

It was an active love overflowing from perfect knowledge and strengthened by complete trust. It was the action of a perfect man, stronger than the affection of all human hearts united—a love which at once was the cause of our salvation, and in which our own slight love of God is given a meaning and a real power.

When Our Lord loved His Father with this complete love, there began that worship *in Spirit and in Truth* which He spoke of to the woman of Samaria. That true worship had been neglected by the Jews; but it was to be given an unshakable foundation in Christ and carried on by His Church till the end of time. The Church is the continuation of

Christ's life on earth, and as it continues and completes His life, so, too, it continues His prayer. We are incorporated into the Church which is His Mystical Body because Christ is the life of our souls, and for this very reason our love is pleasing to God. Hence the value of our love comes only from its being through Christ with Christ and in Christ. *Per Ipsum et cum Ipso et in Ipso* we pray in the Mass as we offer to the Father *omnis honor et gloria*. In the same way, our prayer must be made in unity with our Saviour.

Even though at times the Evangelists do not portray the scenes with as much detail as we might wish, we are given ample opportunity in the pages of the Gospel to learn the qualities of our Lord's prayer. These qualities we shall examine as they appear to us from what is written, without going at length to fill in details left out by the narrators. Let us first take those aspects of the prayer of Christ that are more often overlooked.

Silence was our Lord's most constant companion. His wish was rather to be in the quiet company of His chosen ones than amidst the noise and bustle of the crowds. So it was in His public life; but how much more marked is it in regard to His hidden life! For three years He preached His Gospel of Love—for thirty years before that He remained in the peaceful surroundings of the countryside. To the Jews, when speaking of prayer in the sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, *When you pray . . . go into your room and, closing the door, pray to the Father in secret*. It was the same spirit of peaceful solitude that prompted Him to withdraw time and again from the multitudes and go into the mountains to pray. While there He would be free from the distractions of His daily work and would be able to give His whole self to God in prayer. He chose to go away from the crowd because His prayer, although it must often have been for them, was certainly not to them. That His Father saw Him in secret was enough for our Lord. Perhaps the reason for this insistence on silence was to bring home more clearly to us the way we are to go about our prayer. It is all very well for saints to be able to preserve their union with God during the busy hours of the day—a thing impossible in practice for people who are not saints. We shall not all rise to this degree of intimacy; but certainly our Lord does expect of us and He has made it clear by His own example, that we should frequently retire alone and pray in some quiet place. Christ was not like the Pharisee who went to the high place in the temple and shouted out his goodness, nor *like the hypocrites, who love to pray standing in the Synagogues and at the street corners*. This spirit of silence is so opposed to our modern ideas of excitement and publicity that we notice it is soon as we become acquainted with the life of Christ. But, despite the fact that it is so neglected by the world, it is silence that we should cultivate in our efforts to approach God. *Who is man that thou art mindful of him*, was the thought of the Psalmist, and if we could only make this thought our own each time we begin to pray, then we would remember at least to approach the majesty of God in silence.

That God should be generous is one of the most wonderful, and at the same time, mysterious things about Him. His being generous is wonderful for us because otherwise we should not be alive. If He was not generous there would have been no creation, no angels, nor a universe. On the other hand, when we do realise what He has done, we find it hard to see the reason. Why should He have chosen weak human beings to share in His Divine Life and happiness? Perhaps the best answer is to be found in His generosity. The greatest indication of this willingness to give Himself is the Incarnation. That God should have created man is striking enough, but how much more striking surely that God, having made man from nothing, should in His greatness, Himself become the helpless creature that He had made. There shines through all the actions of the Son of God this same characteristic of doing good for others. Nor is it lacking in His prayer: *Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has desired to have you that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail, and do thou . . .* In the same way, He prayed for all His Apostles and followers. It is only natural that Christ should have interceded so much for His friends because His work depended on them. So the generosity of His prayer is best illustrated by His words on the cross, when, after subjecting Himself to every insult, He prayed for His persecutors in the words, *Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*. He could not do enough for men, and here as He hung on the cross He was unable to forget those who had put Him there. It was not sufficient to die for all men—no, the Son of God must pray even in His last breath for His enemies. Therefore, how can we ever kneel down to pray while fostering hatred in our hearts for those who have done us harm? In this scene, Christ shows us, that our generosity should include even those who have offended us.

The knowledge that God is so generous helps us to be confident when we approach Him. If we wish to be like Christ in prayer confidence and trust in our Heavenly Father will be one of our principal qualities. We are children of God, our Father, and, after all, what is more noticeable about the way children approach their parents than their confidence? In the knowledge that their father and mother have always been good to them, distrust is far from their minds. Who could be a more perfect example of trust in God than Jesus Himself, appreciating as He did more than anyone else His Father's power?

In the scenes of His early life, there is a calmness quite out of proportion to His years; as, for example, when He is teaching the Doctors in the temple. His explanations of the scripture must have been full of wisdom, otherwise the Priests would have ignored Him. It was in the temple some years later that Christ did not hesitate to turn over the money changer's tables, even though He was in the thick of His enemies. This confidence goes with Him throughout His public life in such an outstanding way that it points constantly to His Divinity. When Jesus prayed before the grave of Lazarus, He thanked God that He had been heard and then continued, *Yet I knew that Thou hearest me always*. To the Apostles, when they heard His words about the difficulty of the rich man entering Heaven, and were in doubt whether anyone would be saved, He said, *With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God*. He accused the Sadducees of not knowing the scriptures nor *the power* of God. His confidence is brought out during the sufferings in the garden—Abba, Father, all things are possible to Thee. Earlier on that evening, we are given a further instance of His trust, for when the chief Priests tried to arrest Him He made them draw back. *Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to My Father and He shall presently give Me more than twelve legions of angels*. It was necessary only that He should ask and His prayer would be granted. He did not hesitate or try to escape, but He proclaimed to those who came out against Him the trust He had in God, which, working through the power of prayer, was able to overcome any human force. A wish, and He could have had His enemies at His mercy.

If we are really earnest about our prayer we shall not neglect this all-important quality of confidence in God. Christ wants us to begin our prayer by addressing God as *Our Father*, and in this spirit of childlike confidence He wishes us to carry through all our dealings with Him. Let us not forget, also, that we are speaking to one who is more interested in us than we are ourselves, and who can do more for us *in one moment than we could do in a thousand years*. It would be an insult to God were we to turn our hearts to Him, while at the same time doubting His care for us or His ability to help us, Whereas, if we begin our prayer remembering the thought of St. Paul, *I can do all things in Him who strengthens me*, we shall be associating ourselves in spirit with Christ, and with Him, we, too, shall be able to give thanks to God for hearing us always.

Yet another quality of Our Lord's prayer, showing us still more clearly how He prayed, is heroism. As we follow Him on those lonely vigils in the mountains, as we watch Him turn His eyes to Heaven when the people walk away with the words that His doctrines were too hard to believe, as He prays daily for the Apostles, and finally submits to the agony of the passion, praying without ceasing, what prayer can we imagine more heroic. This is a quality that we shall strive to introduce into our prayers; for if we are to persevere in our union with God we must be heroic. It is easy enough to pray at odd intervals, but it is no easy matter constantly to deny ourselves and overcome the inclination to comfort which hinders us from going down on our knees and recollecting ourselves. If we are really anxious to learn from Christ, we shall do this, *If you would come after me, take up your cross daily and come follow me*. Such are our Lord's own words for those who wish to imitate His example.

How could His prayer have been anything but heroic when it was so strong that He willingly left every attraction to spend the night alone? Christ was as truly man as we are, and it was natural for Him to feel attracted by the company of men. Even more so was this true of Him, whose personality was so attractive that it was natural and easy for Him to become the centre of a group. Our Divine Master was far from being overcome by temptation to His Own glory, and night after night He rejected it to spend the hours in solitude with His Father. Considering that our Lord's active life was so tiring, working all day, preaching, healing the sick, instructing His disciples, walking long distances, His prayer appears even more heroic. For He would have been tired after all these activities, and, humanly speaking, would have felt more

like resting than spending the night in the prayer of God.

The very constancy of His prayer is an indication of how heroic it was. We have seen how He never missed an opportunity of giving us an example in this matter. From His strength let us draw our strength so that we shall be able to go alone to pray, and, as well, to pray frequently. Even if it seems to others that we are wasting our life by praying often, we may be assured that only in this way shall we find our true life of union with God. Did not Christ say, *He who loses His life for My sake shall find it.*

Our attitude to prayer must be that it is really the business of life; for what after all is more important to life or living than that we should know God. The best way to get to know God is to pray, to talk to Him as He wants us to, as a child speaks to its father and then listens to what it is told. If we know God in this way we shall certainly love Him, and from knowledge and love will flow perfect service.

One of the scenes that always comes to mind when we think of Christ and prayer, is His agony in the garden. This is the summit of His prayer. In it we find more clearly than in any other scene some of the most important qualities of His intercourse with God. Let us turn to it now, and see how it helps us to understand the heroic nature of His prayer.

The atmosphere of this scene is full of terror as His agony increases and His desolation becomes more intense. He had begun His suffering that evening with prayer, and in the garden He falls on His knees to continue. His thoughts are turned now, not to what He wanted the Apostles to do, nor to how He had done His Father's will, but only to the sins of men. A little while before He said to His Apostles, *Pray that you may not enter into temptation.* Then, going away a few yards, *He knelt down and began to pray.* It was not the same consoling prayer that had filled His heart during His public work, nor the glorious prayer of His Transfiguration on Mount Thabor. But now the insults of all the centuries were brought together in all their fulness and foulness to terrify the man who was God. The mental agony of Jesus was so great that *His sweat become as drops of blood running down upon the ground.* Under that strain His prayer did not cease, for St. Luke tells us *He prayed the more earnestly.* Christ had persevered in prayer in all the difficulties of His life, but this trial was not like the others. It was the most terrible moment of all, and if He began to weaken now we would have had little cause to wonder. But such was the strength of Christ's prayer that even when His mind could be taxed no further, and His body had already given way under the strain, He prayed the more earnestly.: Could we imagine greater heroism? We need go no further in seeking a standard by which to judge our own attempts to become intimate with God; for here He shows us that even the greatest suffering must be no obstacle to our efforts at praying; rather it will spur us on and our cross will help us to think only of Christ our model who *being in agony prayed more earnestly.* How often do we think it too much that the Church should ask us to pray every Sunday at Mass? Surely this is little enough when compared to the trouble our Master took to pray—when judged by the heroism of His prayer. No matter how difficult it is to think about *our Father in Heaven*, or how great the suffering that this same Father permits to come our way, we must continue in prayer and continue more earnestly as the weight of the cross increases. During His agony our Lord went three times to see if Peter, James and John were watching with Him, but each time He was disappointed, and, returning, bowed His head to the ground. He, too, could have fallen asleep for He was as tired as they, but unlike them, He was strong in His determination to do God's will. Christ would have foreseen the temptations which were to come our way when ease and pleasure would draw us from union with Him, so He gave us this perfect ex-ample. Who could have done more for us' than Christ? Who was more deserving of rest than He? But to Our Lord prayer was more important than any amount of rest, *And leaving them He went again and prayed a third time.*

This quality of strength in prayer, proved so clearly by His perseverance on these occasions, brings out another point in Christ's character, viz., His readiness or willingness to pray. There is never a suggestion of hesitation or indecision in Our Lord's attitude to this sacred duty. He was eager to get away by Himself, to turn aside and pray for His Apostles, to intercede with His Father for those who asked His help. Just as He acted towards them by straight away doing what they wanted, so His prayer seemed to flow naturally from a heart full of love for His Father. It is usually so hard for us to work up any enthusiasm for our prayer that it will help us to watch Jess leaving the crowds or giving Himself completely to prayer for His chosen ones in the Supper-room, or going again to His place in the garden, His body weary but His heart

anxious to accept the approaching cross and death. This willingness, which was so intimately bound up with His spirit of prayer, had been foretold by Isaias, *He was offered because He himself wished it*, and St. John records the words, *I lay down My life because I have power to lay it down and to take it up again*.

These are some of the qualities of Our Lord's prayer. But the question naturally arises—why was His prayer so great; what was there about His prayer that put it on such a plane? What in a word was the central and most important characteristic providing the foundation on which these qualities rested? This is the question we must answer if we are to arrive at anything like a real understanding of the prayer of Christ. If we can discover this secret and set about acquiring it ourselves, we shall be well on the way to learning of Him, *Who gave us an example that as He has done so we should do*, and those qualities which we have seen, will begin to appear in our own prayer.

When Our Lord fell down on His face in the garden of olives, He gave us a most vivid example of how to pray. He showed us the perseverance which drove Him again and again to His knees—the heroism and strength which endured such suffering. Portrayed in this scene as well are the lessons of self sacrifice and attention. But also, He makes clear to us that submission to His Father's will, which lay at the heart of all our Lord's actions, and specially of His prayer. For it is those words, *Not my will but Thine be done*, which mark the climax of His converse with God, and the final act of a tortured man by which He accepted His passion and death for our Redemption.

For Christ this was His food and drink, *To do the will of Him who sent Him*. This was the rule of Christ's life that *Whatever pleased His Father He should do*. During His days on earth nothing was to disturb the object set forth by His words in the Temple while He was yet a child, *Do you not know that I must be about My Father's business?* The reason that had made the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity become man, the will of God remained with Him all the days of His life, even to His death on the cross, when He said, *Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit*.

It was the first thought in all His actions. If they were in agreement with His Father's will, then they were perfect.

I and the Father are one, He said to His disciples, and just as there was this unity of nature in their Divinity, so in Christ's actions was there complete conformity with the wishes of His Father. This singleness of purpose in His daily life was a reflection of the strong inner willing of all that God willed, which lay at the very root of His prayer. In spirit and in truth, in the life of His soul, our Lord submitted Himself continually to God's will; and, as a result, in His daily life He did nothing that was not pleasing to His Father.

In the agony in the garden we find this note in all its fullness. This night was the completion of all those long vigils that He had spent on the mountain sides, of all those lonely hours when He had gone away by Himself simply to pray. For now when His bitter passion was being plotted by the High Priests, Our Lord *Took with Him Peter, James, and John and went, as He was accustomed to the garden of olives, and, falling on His knees, He prayed. Jesus knew all that was to befall Him*, but He did not turn away from His agony. Rather, He turned to prayer. As He bows down for the last time, we can ask ourselves what form did His prayer take. Surely if we can lift the veil now, as He kneels there covered in a perspiration of blood, we shall uncover the secret of His prayer. Surely here, if nowhere else in His life, will we see the spirit that animates the Son of God made man as He turns to the God who made His manhood. The answer is contained in those words which Saint Luke records, and kneeling down He prayed, saying, *Father, if You wish it take away this chalice from Me; still not My will but Thine be done*. Here is His prayer at its height, and what is it but a uniting of His will with God's. Here is His whole purpose, here the secret of His life of prayer. When our Lord made this act of resignation it was certainly not a blind bowing to some vague fate, but a determined and reverent willing of what His Father desired. It was a strong act of the will bringing with it untold suffering, but done in the spirit of love and sacrifice. Christ was loving us then with greater love than anyone has ever had for us. He was loving His Father, too, and thinking of His glory and the praise that all creatures would render God through the merits of His own act of submission.

It may seem simple enough that Christ should say, *Not My will but Thine be done*, but when we think of the immense suffering it entailed, and think, too, of who this suffering Person was, we get some idea of what it meant.

It was not, however, as if our Divine Lord was accepting God's will for the first time; but because He was constantly guided by it, He was able to do whatever pleased His Father. It was on account of this union that He was able

to leave His Mother and St. Joseph and stay behind to instruct the teachers of the law in the temple. Because of this same union in prayer, He overcame all the difficulties of His life in Nazareth. Then when He went out to preach, and bring His message of love to the Jews, it was His inward attachment to the will of God that was the driving force of His actions. This same attachment was developed and perfected in our Lord's prayer. To grasp this force which flowed into all His actions is to see the reasons of His life as He tells us Himself in John: 14-31, *as the Father has given Me commandment so do I.*

Just as for our Lord, the guiding principle was the will of His Father, so, too, for us must this be our rule in all things. If we follow it we shall quickly become other Christs. Our Divine Master wants us to pray—to pray frequently and with perseverance. What greater honour can we give Him than to follow His example in our efforts to please God. We know how delighted a parent is when a child copies his good example; but we cannot appreciate how it must delight the Sacred Heart when He sees us trying to pray as He prayed. When His Apostles asked Him to teach them how to pray, He did not tell them to go away and discover it by their own efforts, but He put on their lips the words of His own prayer. . . *Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.* We shall not be able to do what God wants nor pray as He wishes, unless in our prayers we, too, desire to do His Holy will.

It is in this constant acceptance of all that His Father asked that lies the secret of the strength and confidence of His prayer. We know now just how strong it was and how this confidence was able to overcome all obstacles. The explanation of this power is easy to see when we keep in mind that He *came down from Heaven not to do His own will but the will of Him Who sent Him.* God is omnipotent, and because Christ's prayer was always directed in perfect harmony with the will of God, it was able to do all things. He never asked a favour of God in vain, even when it was a question of restoring life to the widow's son at Naim or to Lazarus.

St. Paul said that *He could do all things in Him who was His strength.* Even more truly Christ could say that His was the strength of God, for in His prayer He bowed His will to that of His Father. It was a submission—*not my will*, but a submission that resulted in perfect power, *but Thine be done.* Christ's prayer, therefore, could work miracles through the power of God because He wanted only what God wanted, and whatever God wishes will be brought about. Christ's prayer was supremely confident because He knew that *with God all things are possible.* Knowing that God's delight is to be with the children of men, His prayer was generous. Our Lord promised us that our prayers also would share in such greatness when He said, *If you ask the Father anything in My name He will give it to you.* If we pray in the name of Jesus, which means with our wills resigned to His, then we will have complete confidence. St. Matthew records our Lord's words, *If you shall say to this mountain, arise and hurl thyself into the sea, it shall be done . . . all things whatever you ask for in prayer, believing you shall receive.* For our Lord's own part it is impossible even to conceive a prayer dissociated from His Father's will . . . *what pleases Him I always do.* So it was that as He stood before the grave of Lazarus He thanked His Father for always hearing Him. In that scene appears one of the best examples of what resulted from this uniformity of interests. There, as Christ is faced with the greatest terror that can befall us, He does not hesitate, but in simple clear words bids Lazarus arise from the tomb. Still His was the power that controlled more than the mere material universe, as when He healed the sick or restored sight to the blind, for He was supreme also over the life of the soul. He had power to restore man's soul to his body, and what is even more wonderful, He was able to forgive them their sins.

With God all things are possible, and with us, too, all things will be possible if our strength rests on Christ and if our wills are united to His. He prayed as He did in the garden that we might have an example—He gave the Apostles the Our Father that they might treasure it and use it as their daily prayer. He wished their prayer to be directed to the glory of God as we learn from the opening sentences, *Our Father Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy Kingdom come*; but He wanted them to have no doubt that the best way to bring about His Father's glory was to accept the will of this same Father, *Thy will be done . . .* It came before all their earthly needs more important than their daily bread—than anything else; so that just as perfectly as it is carried out in Heaven, His will should be fulfilled on earth.

This was His teaching to them, and how could He have proved more clearly that this was what He meant than by those words in the garden *Not My will but Thine be done.* If we would wish to imitate our Divine Model and become like Him,

it will be necessary for us to appreciate the importance He attaches to this submission. Then our union with Christ will become more intimate *for whosoever shall do the will of My Father in Heaven, he is My brother . . . As the great St. Theresa wrote, All that should be sought for in the exercise of prayer is conformity of our will with the Divine will; assuredly in this consists the highest perfection; He who excels most in this practice will receive the greatest gifts from God, and will make most progress in perfection.*

Why Did Christ Pray?

This is the third question which comes to our minds as we try to fathom the depths of the prayer of Christ. Why did He want to exercise this virtue at all, for surely the Son of God, being Divine, had no need of prayer as we know it? Why did He humble Himself to fall on His knees, when He realised perfectly that *He and the Father are one*, and that *everything belonging to the Father is His*. Nevertheless, the fact is that Christ did pray, as we have already seen, and He prayed with such constancy and self-sacrifice that He has left us no doubt about the quality of His prayer. It remains now only that we should examine the reasons which prompted our Saviour to give so much attention to this sacred duty.

Glory to God in the highest, was the song the angels sang as they surrounded the Infant lying in the manger at Bethlehem, providing with these words the most suitable setting for the Incarnation. Mystery and majesty, simplicity and poverty—all the elements that combined to make this first Christmas morning were all to *give Glory to God in the highest*. The angels voiced the theme that was to accompany Jesus throughout His life on earth. *The Word was made Flesh and dwelt among us*; but to what purpose? To give glory to the God of all creation, to praise Him and bless His Holy name. This was the very object that provided the motive for Christ in His prayer, for above all else, He prayed that His Father might be glorified.

After the Last Supper our Lord raised His eyes to Heaven and said, *Father . . . Glorify Thy Son, that Thy Son may glorify Thee*. He prayed for His own glory, but only that by it His Father should be glorified the more. All His life He had thought and acted, and we have no doubt prayed, with His mind on the glory of God. At the beginning of His public mission, when He was tempted by the devil in the desert, Christ showed a complete disregard for displaying His own power and glory. He refused to be led by Satan to turn the stones into bread or to cast Himself down from the temple, as St. Matthew relates in his fourth chapter. Asked by His disciples why a certain man was born blind, He told them that *The works of God were to be made manifest in him*. Not His own works, notice, but the works of His Father. About the same time He said, *If I glorify Myself My glory is nothing*—always disregarding Himself that the Father may be glorified in the Son. We find another example of this when the passion was beginning and the Priests and soldiers were coming to take Him away. Our Lord chose to be treated as a common criminal, even though *He could have entreated His Father and He would have furnished Him with more than twelve legions of angels*. How could Christ have prayed otherwise than for His Father's glory when His actions were so completely animated by this idea. The angels had sung the hymn of praise in His name at Bethlehem, and as He grew up and spent His youthful years in the little peaceful town of Nazareth, we can imagine how He would have spent many hours in praising His Heavenly Master.

In the "Our Father" Christ taught the Apostles, and through them all Christians, to make the praise of God the chief object of their prayers. *Our Father Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name*. He wanted them to begin their prayers in this way so that they would always remember what was the reason for their turning to God. We were made to be happy with God in Heaven and it is by our union with Him and the glory we will give Him that our happiness will be brought about. In searching for happiness now, it is just as important to keep in mind the glory of God, and to ask ourselves whether what we are doing is pleasing to God. Especially in our prayers should this come first, even before any thought of our own virtue or the increase of Grace in our souls. We shall quickly begin to imitate Christ in our daily life, and, like Him, do everything *that the Father may be glorified in us*, if in our prayer we are guided by His example.

Christ prayed as one *who knew not sin and in whom no deceit was found*. It was natural, therefore, that His prayers should be for the most part not petitions but acts of praise and thanksgiving. As He stood before the grave of Lazarus He prayed, *Father. I give Thee thanks that Thou hast heard me*. When He rebuked the lepers whom He had cured for not

returning and thanking Him, Our Lord said, *has no one been found to return and give glory to God except this foreigner?* In the act of instituting the Eucharist, He thanked God for the great gift He was about to leave with us, *and taking a cup and giving thanks He gave it to them.* This spirit of thanksgiving is very often absent from our prayers. We do not neglect to thank a friend who has given us a present. But when we turn to God, who already has given us more than we can ever hope to repay, we seem to forget that He too, deserves to be thanked for what He had given us. Christ expected the lepers to come back and thank Him; in His own prayers He did not neglect to teach us this same lesson, so we can be sure that we shall be pleasing to Him when we, in our turn, pray so as to thank God for His goodness.

Another reason why Christ prayed, and one that frequently occurred during His life, was that He might intercede for His followers and friends. We have seen how, in His temptations He refused to ask any personal favour of His Father. On the night before He chose His Apostles He prayed for them, and it was on the occasion of another vigil, the vigil of His passion, that He gave us the best example of His prayer for others. He prayed, on that night, that God the Father would send them *another Advocate to dwell with them for ever.* He prayed especially for St. Peter, on whom His Church was to rest, *but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith may not fail.* Finally, towards the end of His prayer after the Last Supper, Jesus said, *I pray for them . . . Holy Father, keep in Thy Name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one even as we are. I pray that thou keep them from evil, sanctify them in Thy truth.* It is in this beautiful prayer that we have the finest example of our Lord going out of His way to intercede for those He loved. Again, we notice that there is no question of asking His Father to lessen the sufferings of the passion, then so fast approaching. Even when our Lord seems to be praying for Himself, as later on during that Holy Thursday evening in the garden, it was really not His own glory but the will and glory of His Father that He was seeking. This, then, should be an example for us who are so self-centred and rarely go beyond petitions for our own needs. If anyone had a right to pray for Himself it was Christ on this occasion, but during His Priestly prayer as St. John records, His thoughts remained fixed on His Father's glory, and the good of His Apostles.

How often do we think of the reasons why we pray, or of the fact that our prayers should be above all for the glory of God? Are we like the publican who fell on his knees afar off and beat his breast, or do we resemble the Pharisee, who prayed so as to be seen by men. If we *seek first the Kingdom of God and His glory* in our prayers, as well as in our actions, *all else shall be given to us.* The importance of this cannot be stressed too much, for it is the condition of our receiving help from God. It was not over-looked by our Lord in His prayer, so if we are continually asking God to give us *our daily bread*, and support us in our needs, while at the same time neglecting our duty of praising Him, we shall not be praying as He wishes.

Learn of me, said Christ on one occasion, *for I am meek and humble of heart.* We might equally well apply to Him the words: *LEARN OF ME, FOR I HAVE PRAYED SO THAT YOU MIGHT UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYER, THAT YOU MIGHT KNOW WHEN TO PRAY, HOW TO PRAY, AND WHY YOU SHOULD PRAY.* Nothing which Christ said or did was in vain; everything contains a lesson for us, and few lessons are as important as that of prayer. Another reason, therefore, why Christ prayed was to give us an example *that as He had done so we also might do.* He taught us the importance of prayer by His constant insistence on it, and more especially by His own life of prayer. According to Christ, *we ought constantly to pray and not lose heart.* Nothing can be more certain than that He Himself did not miss an opportunity of raising His heart to God. By His prayer He taught His Apostles that in the life of union with God lay the real source of success. Christ appreciated the super-human task which lay before Him as He left His home in Nazareth to begin His public life, but never once did His steps falter, never once did He lose confidence in the power of His Heavenly Father. His prayer could accomplish all things because in it His will was one with the will of God. Without ceasing, He prayed to show us that if we want our voice to be heard in Heaven we must pray, not now and again, but constantly. He prayed, moreover, to impress on us the fact that He was a man like us—that His human nature was real, and that He, too, had a human will. He proved for us that in the dedication of that will to Divine pleasure lies the essence of Sanctity.

To become holy as Christ was holy is the chief purpose of our lives, for in holiness which is union with God, consists

our only lasting happiness. As St. Augustine said, *Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee*. In our efforts towards this union one of the most important things is prayer, and now that we have seen our Divine Master's attitude, we shall be able to make greater advances towards our goal. In Christ we have the WAY we are to follow, the LIFE from which we are to draw our life, and the TRUTH, bringing with it peace and contentment.

In these days, it is more important than ever before to pray well. The world with its lust for money and power and its childish craving for amusements has cut God out of its life and returned to primitive paganism. The world has no room for prayer, no thought of praising God or of thanking Him for life, no idea of intercourse with a loving Father who has created us and who is interested in everything we do. Against this downward tendency of material values it is necessary to oppose all the spiritual strength we can command. Our prayer, a powerful means of building up this strength, will be fashioned after the example of Christ, for in Him, with Him and through Him, we shall live and pray, until we have received of His fullness and we can say with St. Paul, *I live, now not I, but Christ lives to me*.

Nihil Obstat:

F. MOYNIHAN,
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