

PRAYER

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It does seem presumptuous to write any more on Prayer, when so much has been written so well. An old sentence, however, seems to provide some excuse. It says that what cannot be known too well cannot be said too often. “Quod nunquam satis discitur, nunquam satis dicitur.” The teaching of Our Lord on prayer cannot be known too well, because on it salvation depends. “Pray and you will infallibly be saved, neglect to pray and you will infallibly be lost.” That is the way St. Alphonsus puts the teaching of the Church, the mouthpiece of Our Lord, on the importance of prayer. St. Theresa had already said: “Once a soul perseveres in prayer, no matter what faults the devil may make her commit, I am sure that in the end Our Lord will guide her to the port of salvation.” But Catholics who have been instructed from childhood in the science and in the art of prayer, will know that the saints are merely proposing what is written in the Bible, both Old Testament and New. The texts are so familiar that we will not repeat them. They may be found in larger treatises. To recall them will be to know that in the Christian life there is nothing more necessary than Prayer.

WHAT IS PRAYER

What then, is prayer? There are people who do not like this question “what?” They are very gratified by the saying of Thomas á Kempis: “I had rather feel compunction than know its definition,” or of another mystic who says that it is no great thing to write learnedly about prayer, “but it were a great mastery for a man to practise it.”

And one may well excuse such impatience of definition in a soul that is taught by God the very art of prayer. What does it care to know that the root meaning of the word is “spoken reason,” that prayer is therefore the forth-telling of what is in the mind? It will leave it to the theologian—whose business it is to enrich faith by bringing it the treasures of philosophy—to explain that prayer is the voice of desire, that it is the mind expressing itself with a view to something’s being done, that it is in the nature of a command. Not indeed, admits the theologian, that a child presumes to command its parent when it makes its shy petition. But just as one addressing an inferior expresses one’s mind by way of command about What should be done, so, petitioning a superior, one expresses an order or arrangement, which one, suppliantly, wishes him to realize.

So, by a subtle analysis of mental activity, the theologian strives to assign the precise element in it that constitutes prayer.

.There are simple souls to whom this theological speculation is wearisome. It seems too far removed from the infant’s lisping prayer: “Holy God, make me a good boy.” Prayer in its essence must be a very simple thing, something that even a child may use, and must. But the childlike things are the things most hard to explain. When we have understood the smile on the face of a child we may understand its prayer. St. Thomas Aquinas, who loved all childlike things, set himself to explain it, and in his effort had to scale the heights of philosophy, cold, arid, to most minds uninviting. If we, in these pages, be content to wander in the valley, eschewing the difficult ascents, but rejoicing in the abundant and varied food for thought that is at hand, let us be grateful to the everlasting heights that from them streams of living waters flow, be grateful, too, to those who have scaled the heights to release them.

We shall not, therefore, in these pages follow the philosophers and theologians in their ascent to the cold regions of psychology and metaphysics. We shall be content rather to accept the Catechism definition, which is based immediately on the teaching of St. Paul., and we shall go on from it to see why we should pray, and what for, and to whom, and how.

PRAYER IS AN ELEVATION OF THE MIND TO GOD.

Prayer, says the Catechism of Pope Pius X., is an elevation of the mind to God, to adore Him, to thank Him, and to ask Him for all we need.

We shall consider each phrase of this definition.

First of all, then, prayer, is an elevation, a raising up. Does it seem too obvious to say that it is therefore something

elevating? It raises up, not the body (except in very exceptional cases of mystical prayer) but the soul. “Is any of you sad?” asks St. James, “Let him pray!” Prayer lifts up the downcast heart and mind. That in itself were a great thing, surely. “Lift up your hearts” is the cry that bursts from the mighty heart of Rome, and re-echoes through the world from the morning watch till night wherever the Mass is said. And the answer the Church expects from all her children is: “We have uplifted them to the Lord”—not merely to the mountains, or to the heavens above, or to thoughts of goodness and beauty, but to God Himself. Is God, then, so far from us, an objector may ask, that we must scale the heavens to reach Him? Surely not. God is in all lowly things: especially is He in the lowly heart. Therefore, says a mystic writer, “he that will wisely seek God and find Him, he must not run out with his thoughts, as, if he would climb above the sun and past the firmament, and imagine His Majesty like to a hundred suns. But he must rather draw down the sun and all the firmament and forget it, and cast it beneath him where he is, and set all this and all bodily things also at nought, and then, if he can, think spiritually both of himself and of God also. And if he do thus, then seeth the soul above itself, then seeth it into heaven.”

Man by prayer lifts up his soul to God.

TO ADORE HIM.

Prayer, therefore, is not in the towering thoughts of pride. It is based on humility. It comes when our thoughts are brought low, in face on the one hand with the nothingness out of which we and all things were made, and on the other with the Maker of all. In face of nothingness we must call out for something. Nothing repels: there is no heart of goodness in it that we should desire or love it. Only goodness is attractive. Only goodness can move and lift up the heart. If by prayer, therefore, the soul be lifted up to God, it is because He is attractive. The first appeal He makes is the appeal of goodness. He indeed is Goodness. He is good as no other thing is good; and without Him, it comes home to the prayerful soul, there is nothing good at all. “One is Good God.” In all things besides there is some darkness, some streak of nothingness. In Him there is no darkness. He is all Light, Joy, Love; Beauty. He is Good, adorably.

“The soul with that realization, hastens to efface itself in humble adoration. Moses, when the Lord passed before him “merciful and gracious, patient and of much compassion and love,” making haste, bowed down prostrate to the earth and adored.

Adoration is the first spontaneous offering made to God by any soul that touches Him. It belongs to prayer more properly even than petition or thanksgiving. Heaven, the Home of Prayer, is the home especially of Adoration. All the Angels of God adore Him. Isaias saw the Seraphim, upon the throne of God, high and elevated. And the prayer they said was: “Holy, Holy, Holy, the Lord God of Hosts, all the earth is full of His Glory.” St. John also beheld a throne in Heaven, and on the throne One sitting and around the throne the self-same prayer was said of praise and adoration. Mere petition would be out of place where God’s goodness is fully known. The Angels, and the ancients, and the living creatures of the Apocalypse, could utter only praise.

“They fell down before the throne upon their faces, and adored God saying: Amen. Benediction and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving, honour and power and strength to our God, for ever .and ever. Amen.”

TO THANK HIM.

Some people will wonder that thanksgiving in prayer should come before petition. Thanksgiving, they will think, should be made when petitions have been granted.

That were to do God an injustice. “What have you,” asks St. Paul, “that you have not received?” Our very being is from Him; and the first upraising of our soul is surely the outcome of His Grace. As the soul, therefore, reaches God in thought and love, realizing its own dependence, bowing down in adoration, and uttering itself in praise, there will mingle with its praise the voice of thanksgiving. “What is man that Thou wouldst visit Him?” Of himself, nothing and good for nothing. If now he is anything; if he has aught to rejoice in, or any reason for hope, he owes it all, without any reserve, to God. There is no question of repaying the debt. A man cannot give more than his life: and his life is not his own to give.

But this, at least, gratitude will urge on one who comes in prayer to realize God's overflowing goodness: Give thanks, acknowledge that all that you are, all that you have, all the goodness that surrounds you, is His free gift.

"Let us give thanks to the Lord our God, for it is meet and just."

The prayer of thanksgiving is the first variation of the prayer of praise.

TO ASK HIM FOR ALL WE NEED.

The Supreme Goodness that in prayer we adore and praise we also recognise, logically, as the source of every good. The fairest things in Nature can be only the faintest reflex of God's Beauty. "They are only Our Lady's Mirror." And she? Only Mirror of Justice! God alone is Beauty: other things have their beauty from Him. God is Goodness, and, because He is Goodness, He has made all things good. And He can make all things good—even me. How urgent, then, is the impulse of the soul, in presence of the source of all goodness to voice its desire for goodness, to express itself in petition as well as praise! Its very petition is praise. It is the soul's protesting of its nothingness, its incapacity, its recognition that the source of its every hope is God. He is the Good of all things good.

THE NATURAL LAW OF PRAYER.

Prayer, we may therefore say, is the adoration, thanksgiving or petition offered to God by a creature who has come to the knowledge of the truth that God means everything. It is based on the nature of things. An abyss of nothingness calls upon, an abyss of Being: a helpless thing links itself with the heights from which all help comes. Nothing more natural: nothing more befitting. Just then because prayer is based upon the very nature of the human soul, facing God, it comes within the reach of Natural Law. In other words, there would have been no need of a revelation to impress on man the duty, or to teach him the art, of prayer. Apart altogether from Our Lord's teaching, apart from all question of Divine Grace, man would have been bound, knowing God as the fullness and source of Goodness, to praise Him and to thank Him for it. It would have been his duty to pray. Those pagans against whom St. Paul makes his great indictment were inexcusable "because that, when they knew God, they have not glorified Him as God or given thanks."

They neglected the duty of prayer.

THE PRIVILEGE OF PRAYER

It follows, then, that prayer is the offering to God of something owing to Him as the Fullness and Source of Goodness. It would be an act of justice, if it were a full return. But to Him, from Whom, by Whom, unto Whom are all things no full return can be made. Not justice, therefore, but a nobler virtue called Religion prompts the giving of praise and thanksgiving and suppliant homage. It prompts it as something good and comely, something worthy of a man. Prayer, indeed, is not man's duty merely, but his privilege, his prerogative. One does indeed speak at times of the stars in their humble service, or of the flowers that fold their petals obedient to the call of evening, or of the birds at morning, as at prayer. But that is when poetry breathes into nature a finer spirit than nature has. Nature is less joyous than that. It is not spiritual enough to reach God. Only the human soul breathes worship, utters praise. Not as if there were no voice in nature! The heavens declare the glory of God, all the earth is "garrulous" of Him. There is no blade of grass, nor grain of seed, nor any smaller thing that only the microscope reveals, but utters its appeal to man to think of God. But while the heavens and all the things of nature declare the glory of God, they cannot themselves give glory. It remains for man to make articulate the voice of praise. He is the Pontiff, divinely sealed, to offer always to God nature's sacrifice of praise, "that is to say," comments St. Paul, "the fruit of lips confessing to His Name."

Prayer is man's prerogative.

THE CHRISTIAN LAW OF PRAYER.

Though prayer, apart altogether from the teaching of Faith, is a primary duty of man, in the light of that teaching its character is immensely enhanced.

The faith that we practise as Catholics is founded in its entirety on the teaching of Jesus Christ. His teaching can be expanded into volumes, or it may be reduced to a very simple statement. He came to tell each one of us—blood, says Lacordaire, is the word at its highest power—that God is Adorably Good, that He is our Father, that we are His children. Whatever else Our Lord taught—the Mission of the Holy Ghost, the necessity of the Sacraments and of obedience to the Church, eternal reward and punishment, the Communion of Saints—is all in order that we may know and glorify our Father by showing ourselves His children, conformed to the image of His Divine Son. For instance, we must be baptised. Why? Because otherwise we should not be born again! But that were impossible, remonstrated Nicodemus; until Our Lord gently reminded him that he spoke of a supernatural life, of a regeneration that makes even old men children-children, not of darkness any more, but of God’s Kingdom of light and love. “Know you what it is to be a child? It is to have a spirit yet streaming from the waters of baptism.” Again, Our Lord insists that we cannot have life in us unless we eat food from Heaven! Assuredly, because our life is more than earthly and, therefore, must be nourished on the Bread of Angels. Lastly, we recall the great command: “Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that persecute and calumniate you. For what motive? “That you may be children of your Father Who is in Heaven. “

“As the Christian’s conversation is in heaven,” writes Cardinal Newman, “as it is his duty, with Enoch and other saints, ‘to walk with God,’ so his voice also is in heaven. Prayers and praises are the mode of his intercourse with the next world, as the converse of business or recreation is the mode in which this world is carried on in all its separate courses. He who does not pray does not claim his citizenship with heaven, but lives, though an heir of the Kingdom, as if he were a child of earth.”

The child of God, then, is under a special obligation to pray. His conversation must be in Heaven, which is his home, though he be still on earth. A child of God may not be earthly-minded, not for a moment base or mean. His thoughts must be for his Father’s Glory, his heart upraised to his Father’s home.

Therefore, we ought always to pray, having our hearts and minds always lifted up to God.

A NEW CANTICLE.

St. Augustine, in one of his sermons, comments on the words of the Psalmist, “Sing ye to the Lord a new canticle,” in a way that helps us to see more clearly why we, children of grace, are under a special obligation of prayer. We sing the praises, he says, of what we love; and we love only what we know. Now, it is our great privilege as children of God, sharers in Eternal Life, to know God as Father. “This is Eternal Life, to know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ Whom Thou hast sent.” In the mere natural order, without grace or any special revelation, men would have known God in another way, and been obliged to hymn His glory and His praise. They would have known of His Eternal Power and His Divinity. They were inexcusable who did not glorify Him for that. But St. Paul does not blame them for not praying to God as Father. It was not given to them to use that sweet word. “You will have God for your Father when you are new born,” says St. Augustine. The Gentiles had not yet that grace. They had not yet been given the spirit of children, which is called the Spirit of Grace and of Prayer. But we have! Therefore, the New Canticle is for us to sing. We have received the spirit of the adoption of sons, whereby we cry: “Abba, Father.”

Prayer, then, as we conceive it and as we should practise it, is, above all, this: The voice of a child calling upon its Father in Heaven in praise, in thanksgiving, in loving appeal.

OUR LORD’S EXAMPLE.

New light is thrown on many familiar texts on prayer when they are considered in view of the truth that prayer is the voice of a child’s desire, to a Father whose love it knows. Our Lord’s teaching on prayer was, to the Jews, altogether new. His own practice of prayer appealed to them as something quite out of the ordinary. We can sense their wonderment in the way they put the question to Him once, after He had been pouring forth the desire of His own child heart to His Father: “Lord, teach us to pray!” They had not been accustomed to treat with God familiarly. They would hardly venture even to pronounce His Name. “The Lord is great and exceedingly to be feared.” They lived under a law of fear. The echoes of the

thunders of Sinai when God spoke to Moses had not died away in the ears of the Jews, who marvelled at the child-like, loving way in which Christ spoke to God His Father.

The example of the actual prayers of Our Lord left us by the Evangelists are few enough. We know, of course, that His whole life was a prayer in the sense already explained. His whole heart's desire, and all His thoughts, were fixed on His Father's glory and how He might promote it. His soul was lifted up to God from the first moment of its existence, and was never once cast down, not even during the mystery of the Dereliction on Calvary, which only served to call forth words of intensest prayer. And one wonders whether in that hour, if Our Lord had not willed, for our instruction, to use the great words of the Psalmist: "My God, why hast Thou forsaken me," He would not again have used the form of invocation most dear to Him and which He was to use again before He died, in His very last recorded prayer: "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit." With that sweet word, 'Father,' His prayer nearly always began: "Father, forgive them; Father, if it be possible let this chalice pass; Holy Father, keep them in Thy name whom Thou hast given me, that they may be one as we also are; Father, glorify Thy Son: glorify Thou me, O Father, with Thyself, with the glory which I had before the world was, with Thee; Father, save me from this hour; I confess to Thee, O Father, Lord of Heaven and earth. . . ."

It is always as a child that Our Blessed Lord opens in prayer His heart and mind, human as our own and as dependent. Only a saint could attempt to speak of the hours passed on the hillside when, in St. Luke's significant words, He was spending the night in prayer. We shall not follow Him up the slopes: the sanctities of that intercourse are not for us to know. But we shall await Him as He comes down from His prayer, and very lovingly ask Him, together with His disciples: "Lord, teach us to pray."

OUR LORD'S TEACHING.

"Thus, therefore, shall you pray: Our Father who art in heaven ..."

It was Our Lord's own prayer, which He now, with limitless condescension, asks us to join in. "The Son of God, Our Lord Jesus Christ, hath taught us a Prayer." At the thought of it, St. Augustine, not able to contain himself, soars to the Mystery of Christ: "Though He be the Lord, Himself, the Only Son of God, yet He would not be alone... He hath vouchsafed to have brethren. . . Therefore hath He called into His brotherhood the peoples of the nations, and the Only Son hath numberless brethren who say, Our Father who art in heaven."

Frequent repetition tends to dull our appreciation of the meaning, and sense of the beauty, of the Lord's Prayer. Yet it is so weighted with meaning that Tertullian, one of the very early Christian writers, calls it a compendium of the whole Gospel. St. Augustine thinks it so complete that we may not ask for anything but what is written therein. And St. Thomas Aquinas sums up all the testimonies of the Fathers by calling it "oratio perfectissima"—an altogether perfect prayer.

We have here only to point to what is surely the keynote of the whole prayer—the invocation "Our Father." If we really stand before God as children and realise what it means to have a Father in Heaven, we will instinctively make our prayer on the lines our Blessed Lord has traced. He did not teach us to say merely the Our Father. He said: "Thus shall you pray," that is, in the attitude of a child. It was on this He insisted always. His instructions on prayer are linked always with His teaching of the Fatherhood of God. Our first thought on coming to pray must be that God is our Father. And as our Father seeth in secret, therefore we may pray, not in the temple only, but even in the privacy of our room. And we may be sure that our Father understands; and that, just because He is our Father, He cannot be deaf to the appeal of His children. "Which of you if he asks his father for bread will he give him a stone? or a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? or if he shall ask for an egg, will he reach him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven give the good Spirit to them that ask Him?"

Prayer, then, it is clear, from the example and teaching of Our Lord, is the call of a child to its Father in Heaven, And the baby language of a child is dear to a father's heart. Even doctors and masters of the art of prayer like St. Gregory the Great have professed themselves to be "infantes balbutientes," stammering babes, when they tried to utter God's greatness and His praise. But God likes to hear the pleading of His child and its lisping voice proclaiming how good its Father is. He does not need to be told its thoughts or desires. He knows them perfectly.. Our Lord Himself has reminded us of that:

“Your Father knoweth what is needful for you before you ask Him.” And yet He goes on to give, in His Father’s name, the great command and promise: “Ask and it shall be given you; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you.”

But why, if our Father knows already our need and our desire?

WHY WE MUST PRAY.

One might indeed imagine that faith and hope and love would be better shown towards God by a child whose very assurance of his Father’s goodness prevented him from asking anything at all than another who put forward his petition. Even saints have seemed to suggest that it may be more perfect not to ask for anything determinate from God, but to leave everything simply to Him to grant or deny as His love may determine. Yet the Gospel command, relentless, insistent, still rings out: Ask, seek, knock. And mingling with it St. James’s warning: “You have not because you ask not.”

“Therefore, brethren,” concludes St. Augustine, “ought we to exhort to prayer both ourselves and you. For other hope we have none amid the manifold evils of this present world, than to knock in prayer.”

But St. Augustine was not heedless of the objection already put: Why should I pray, if prayer is only the expression of my desire, and God already knows perfectly what I desire. He answers it very pithily: “It is God’s Will that thou shouldst pray that He may give to thy longings, that His gifts may not be lightly esteemed.” In another place, He adds the further reason—“that thou mayest be forced to confess that He can do all things.” We have already seen that God is honoured by the protestation, implied in every prayer, of utter dependence and trust.

St. Augustine’s answer is put in the concrete by Fr. Vincent McNabb, O. P., in a beautiful story—which we have leave to reproduce. It is found in “The Path of Prayer,” and is given as an extract from the diary of an invalid soldier:

“My little grand-daughter, Hilda, aged three, paid me her usual visit this afternoon. I had prepared three chocolates against her coming. They were left, as by accident, on the table by the bed-head, but were strategically placed beyond her reach. This was a subtle plan of mine; which, proved as entirely successful as my first frostier embassy.

“She came; she saw; she was conquered. She came with her dear blue eyes, like a butterfly, into my room, where I was fatefully making up my mind whether my illness was to be the winter or the spring of my soul. Thank God, it is to be the spring.

“She saw the chocolates I had meant her to see. And she was conquered because the Creator had made her, the work of His love—to be conquered by such simple strategy as was the work of my love

“O my God, I can now pray. My little grand-daughter has taught me, but a few hours ago; not by praying to you, her Father in Heaven, but by praying to me her grandfather on earth.

“I cannot say I do not love my little grand-child. And there are a thousand things I have given her without her asking—the blue frock that made her sister to the butterflies; the silk ribbon in her hair; the silver rosary round her neck. But yet I love to give other things to her only on her asking. Thou knowest why!

“How lovely were her blue eyes and the curves of her mouth, and her uplifted head!—O Maker of her eyes, and mouth and head!—how lovely was my little butterfly as she besought me to raise her to the bedside whence she could reach the chocolate that I meant her to reach. Thou knowest, O my Master !”

God treats us as a father treats his children. If He asks us to pray, it is because He loves us. He knows that prayer brings out all that is best in us. It raises us beyond ourselves; it lifts us up to Beauty; it makes us appear, and be, like God’s Divine Son. And therefore it makes us happy. It is, in that sense, an end in itself, and requires no other justification. See a saint at prayer, and, you will ask no reason why !

HOW WE SHOULD PRAY.

To the question “How should we pray?”, one Catechism answer is: We should pray with attention, devotion, humility, confidence and perseverance. The Catechism clearly supposes faith, without which there is no prayer at all. “Lex credendi est lex orandi”: The law of belief is the law of prayer. The Catechism of Pope Pius X also mentions resignation as a

condition of perfect prayer.

But all that Catechisms say can be summed up in one word. And it will surely suggest itself to those who have followed this exposition. We should pray in the spirit of a child of God. It is such a simple answer St. Paul would give. He would be almost impatient, we venture to think, of any further elaboration. Love God, he would say, and pray as you like. A child of God, one who walks in the spirit of childlike love, will pray rightly without thinking of it. "I do as a child would who cannot read," confesses the Little Flower almost apologetically. "I just say what I want to say to God quite simply and He never fails to understand."

Nevertheless, it may be helpful to consider in more detail how a child of God should pray, and for what.

MENTAL AND BODILY PRAYER.

Prayer, it has been said, voices the desire of a child of God. In one sense its whole life is a prayer, in that its longing for its Father's home and His Glory is expressed in all its actions. "If thou art ever longing," says St. Augustine, "thou art ever praying. When sleepeth prayer? When desire grows cold." Hence the command is given to us: "Pray without ceasing." But though desire prays always, even while the tongue is silent, there are times when the very "greatness of desire impels the body also to enter into prayer, by expressing it in word and song, in prostration and genuflection. Hence the division of prayer into mental, when heart and mind commune with God without expressing themselves outwardly, and bodily, or, as it is more commonly viewed, vocal prayer, which finds words to express the soul's desire. It is the natural overflow of mental prayer, while it also, even philosophers point out, helps to fix thought and inflame desire.

What then should be the desire that prayer would have fulfilled, this desire of the heart of a child, breathed before God its Father?

WHAT WE SHOULD PRAY FOR.

To the question now raised, we must seek for an answer high above all creation. The desire of a child of God is not bounded by what can be measured or spoken. "As the part panteth after the fountain of water; so my soul panteth after Thee, O God." Desire is the offspring of love, and reaches even as high. The love of a child of God manifests itself in desire that this Father's Will be done. That desire will embrace every other desire. The petition "Thy Will be done" will qualify every prayer. There is nothing more lovable, more adorable, more desirable than Our Father's Will, even when it seems most full of dread. "My Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me. Nevertheless, not as I will but as Thou wilt." So our Eldest Brother has given us an example. He had no other aim coming into this world than to do His Father's Will. He had in life no other desire. To know what we should pray for, therefore, will be to know what is the Will of God our Father, for creation in general and for us in particular.

OUR FATHER'S WILL.

"If any man deny that the world was created for God's glory let him be anathema." In this way the Vatican Council defines a truth at once declared in Sacred Scripture and proved in philosophy. God's glory is the end of creation. It is the supreme object of the Divine Will. Creation, says St. Thomas, is the voice of the Word of God; and all creatures are a chorus repeating in harmony the same Word that He in Heaven chants eternally. The Word, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, is the perfect expression of His Father's Glory. He is called, in mystic language; the Song of Perfect Praise. To echo that praise the world was made. It was established by, and in the image of, the Word of God. The Divine Will impressed on it is that it reflect, and always more perfectly, His praise. That is the first duty, the divine office, of all creation

"Praise ye the Lord from the heavens; praise ye Him in the high places.

Praise ye Him all ye angels; praise ye Him all His hosts.

Praise ye Him, O sun and moon, praise ye Him all ye stars and light.

Praise Him ye heaven of heavens: and let all the waters that are above the heavens praise the name of the Lord. For He

spoke and they were made.

Praise the Lord from the earth, ye dragons and all ye Word.”

Fire, hail, snow, ice, stormy winds, which fulfil His deeps.

Everything, even in inanimate nature, is ordered to the praise of God; it fulfils His Word. But only men can fulfil it freely, and in recognition of its Goodness and Truth. A book without a reader, a voice without a hearer, above all, an altar without a priest, is the description of the world with man left out. He only can render glory as St. Augustine defines it: “Clear knowledge together with praise.”

The great object, therefore, of Our Father’s Will is that He be glorified. Let no one imagine, thinking God “man’s giant shadow hailed divine,” that this means egoism on His part. God is not benefited or enriched by His creation. But, on the other hand, to glorify Him is His creature’s perfection and happiness. And, therefore, God, in His loving goodness gave man the power to glorify Him on earth even as, by His Divine Son, He was glorified in heaven. He gave to Adam the grace of sonship, formed in him the heart of a child, that he might pour it forth in love and praise.

Adam refused this Divine Office. He made the fateful choice: I will not serve. And grace was taken from him and from human nature.

. “Disproportioned sin
Jarred against nature’s chime, and with harsh din
Broke the fair music that all creatures made
To their Great Lord, whose love their motion swayed
In perfect diapason.”

The sacrifices that fallen man could offer fell infinitely short of what God looked for from a race which He had made divine. “Shall I eat of the flesh of bullocks or shall I drink the blood of goats? Offer to the Lord the sacrifice of praise. The sacrifice of praise will glorify Me.” But the dead do not give praise, O Lord! The human race was dead in sin. Creation was dumb to the pleading of a Father’s heart to hear the voice of his children. Men’s iniquity had divided between them and their Father.

“Then, said I: Behold I come, to do Thy Will, O God.” —to give Thee the glory that only a child can give..... “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us. And we saw His glory. . .”

The object of prayer, therefore, must be above all that God our Father may be glorified; that the Kingdom of Christ, His Glory, may increase upon the earth. “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name, thy Kingdom come, thy Will be done—on earth as it is in heaven.”

THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD.

The first object of prayer is God’s Glory: its first petition that His Name be praised. Now, this glory and praise can only be rendered through Jesus Christ Our Lord. We cannot raise our mind and heart to God our Father but by Him: “No one cometh to the Father but by Me.” Through Him, with Him, in Him, is all glory given, repeats the Church each day at Mass.

Prayer, then, if it is to be what we have called it, the voice of a child raised to its Father in heaven in praise, in thanksgiving, in appeal, must be made through Jesus Christ Our Lord. “By Him, says St. Paul, let us offer the sacrifice of praise always to God.”

ONE WITH CHRIST.

This is the truth that explains Christianity: Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, really lives in the members of the Church. There is no truth besides this to explain the mystery of prayer. It will repay consideration.

To live in the souls of men Christ was born: “That they may have life and may have it. more abundantly.” He died (how often do we say it unthinkingly!) that we might live. From His pierced side there flowed water and blood, symbolic, say the Fathers, of the two great life-giving Sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist. We come to life, therefore, that is, to

the life of children of God, which means union with His Divine Son, only through Death. Christ had to be lifted up in deathly loveliness that He might attract us to the love that is our real life. "We are baptised in His death," says St. Paul. Plunged into the baptismal font, according to the ancient ritual, as into a tomb, the Christian is born out of it in newness of life.

We may note here how in baptism we associate ourselves with Christ as Priest, and with His Sacrifice. God was never glorified as He was by His Divine Son on Calvary. The Cross is His Glory: ours, therefore, remarks St. Paul. The day in the year that we signalise as Good is the day of Christ's Sacrifice. And its renewal each day at Mass is still, by far, the greatest and most perfect prayer. Now when, through Baptism, we become one with Christ in supernatural life, we also become sharers in His Priesthood. The baptismal character, we say it on the authority of the Church, is nothing else than a certain participation in the priesthood of Christ. Hence the catechumens, who had not yet received it, were excluded from offering the sacrifice of the Mass. It is in virtue of the baptismal character that we can glorify our Father in Heaven: we can render Him the Divine Service that is His due: we can offer Him the praise that from the creation of the world His Father's heart longed to hear rising to Him from the earth. We offer it by our sacrifice and by our prayer, which is not our own but His of Whose Mystic Body we now are members. Thanks to the Death of Christ we can render what sin had made impossible—the Divine Office of Prayer.

LITURGICAL PRAYER.

While, therefore, every prayer must be made "through Jesus Christ our Lord," Whom alone the Father hears, there is one prayer which is by special title His. We call it liturgical prayer, or the Church's prayer. Now the Church is Christ.

This last statement is not a rhetorical exaggeration. It is Gospel truth. Christ is still on earth, continuing, above all by sacrifice and prayer, His work of saving the world. This is the mystery of which St. Paul especially was made the minister. "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me? Who art Thou, Lord?" I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest." Christ ascended into heaven, only that He might exercise in fullest measure the rights He had by suffering acquired over His Mystical Body which is the Church. The Church is called with equal reason the Body of Christ or the Family of God, under which aspect we have already considered it.

The Son of God became Man that He might glorify His Father's Name. Only through Him, we have seen, could glory be given. And as God's glory is the end of all creation, it was not fitting that after a few years (after the year 30 A.D.) it should cease to be rendered. The loving Wisdom of Christ found a way of fulfilling on earth the work of God even when He should have ascended into heaven. He would share with others His Life, His Love, His Power to glorify the Father. Jew and Gentile, Sythian and Greek, Celt and Saxon, people of every nation, tribe and tongue, He would draw into the unity of one Mystic Body, quickened by His Spirit. That Body is called the Church: that Spirit, the Spirit of grace and of prayer.

What the Church does, Christ does. And what Christ did the Church still does. She preaches, She teaches, She works, She suffers. Above all, She offers sacrifice and prayer. The Sacrifice is the Mass: the prayer is the Divine Office.

If you would learn how to pray, go and hear the Church at prayer. The Church praying is Christ praying. Those whose privilege it is to fulfil the Divine Office He came on earth to render, do it in His name. It is Christ who offers the Sacrifice of the Mass; and if we say that the Divine Office is the Church's offering—Her sacrifice made as it were to applaud and to fill out through the hours of the day His morning Sacrifice—then we must say that as the Church makes His Sacrifice Hers, so does He make Hers His own.

In the Divine Office there is offered to God the homage of a child, praising, thanking, appealing, in words inspired by the Spirit of a child: in the Mass there is offered in boundless return to a Father's outraged Justice, a Child's Pierced Heart.

THE PARTICULAR ENDS OF PRAYER.

Speaking of the Mass, the Catechism says that it is offered "to give God honour and glory, to thank Him for His

benefits, to obtain remission of our sins, and all other graces and blessings.” To speak comprehensively, the Mass is offered as an act of perfect sacrifice and surrender to God’s Will. It is the final expression and complete realisation of the desire Our Lord had in coming into this world “to do Thy Will, O God.” This too must be (in how much smaller measure?) the object of all our prayers. “The primary motive of prayer,” wrote Cardinal Gibbons, “is to acknowledge our filial dependence on God and His Fatherly care of us.” And the second object of prayer, Christian courtesy requires, is to thank Him for it.

To obtain favours, therefore, is not to be regarded as the chief object of prayer. But’ it is a necessary object. Prayer .does not consist, as some heretics have said, in a mere spirit of resignation to, and acquiescence in God”’s Will, a spirit so passive as to inhibit any expression of particular desire, any call for help. The obligation of prayer is put upon us, by Natural Law and by God’s express command, not merely that we may pay God due homage, but that we may cooperate with Him in the working out of our soul’s salvation .and the salvation of the world. Prayer must be made, or we shall certainly be lost; and if the world is to be saved it must be saved above all by prayer.

Should we then, in prayer, confine our petitions to a general plea for our own and the world’s salvation? Or may we follow (as our hearts would love to) the example .of the Irish Mother putting “trimmins’ on the Rosary”:

“She would pray for all our little needs
And every shade of care
That might darken on the Sugarloaf
She’d meet it with a prayer.
She would pray for this one’s sore complaint
Or that one’s ‘hurt hand,’
Or that someone else might make a deal
And get that bit of land
Or that Dad might sell the cattle well
And seasons good might rule
Or that little John, the weakly one,
Might go away to school.
There were trimmin’s too that came and went
But ne’er she closed without
Adding one for something special
‘None of you must know about’.”

We are surely glad that St. Thomas’s great authority sanctions and commends that way of prayer so dear to Irish hearts. May the Rosary and its trimmings sanctify for ever our Irish homes! There are cold heretics who would merely allow general petitions to be presented before God’s Majesty signifying a suppliant’s desire that His Will be done, and that all things may happen in what manner pleases Him best. And even some Catholic writers, stressing rightly the importance of utter conformity to God’s Sweet Will, perhaps emphasise too much their teaching on “holy indifference.” God does not want us to be wholly, indifferent. He does not even want us to will explicitly the particular thing that He in fact intends. He does not, for instance, require that a mother should will the death of her only son, though He may intend that her son shall die. He expects only resignation and whole-hearted submission to the arrangement of His greater love. But He is always a Father who understands and who sympathises with His child in whatever sorrow, or longing, or anxiety, or fear, or love that may possess, or strive to possess, its heart. And He is eager that His child should confide to Him its longing, tell Him its love, even its dislike, be open about its anxiety and ask His help. He wishes His child to ask Him for whatever it thinks it needs most of all here and now. And more than often. He grants exactly what it asks.

“Dad did sell the cattle well
And little John her pride
Was he who said the Mass in black

The morning that she died;
So her gentle spirit triumphed—
For 'twas this without a doubt
Was the very special trimmin'
That she kept so dark about.”

Any Catholic can furnish from his own life story unnumbered examples of marvellous answer to prayer; and those who need it can find in the lives of the saints detailed evidence that Our Lord has kept His almost incredible word: “Amen, I say to you that whosoever shall say to this mountain, Be thou removed and cast into the sea, and shall not stagger in his heart but believe, that whatsoever he sayeth shall be done; it shall be done unto him. Therefore, I say unto you, all things whatsoever you ask when ye pray, believe that ye shall receive; and they shall come unto you.”

Prayer, then, should be made always in the spirit of a child, which is the spirit of Christ, first to glorify God our Father by rendering to Him our homage in testifying our dependence; secondly, to, thank Him for His Goodness in allowing us to call ourselves His children; thirdly, to beg of Him the graces and benefits that we, in view of our supernatural destiny, should, or may, desire.

UNANSWERED PRAYER

Prayer so made is always answered. If we use the term “unanswered prayer,” it must be taken in a strictly relative sense. The prayer that is inspired by childlike faith and love receives its answer as soon as it is said. If it be said, as every true prayer is said, with the aim of giving God glory and promoting on earth His Kingdom of Peace, its fulfilment marks its saying. If it be a child’s loving call to a Father’s heart to visit it with Mercy and Pardon, again it is heard at once. “The petition ascends: the mercy of God descends,” to use a sentence attributed to St. Augustine. If it be for anything whatsoever conducive to Eternal Life (the one thing upon which his heart is set who values his divine sonship above every good) it is infallibly efficacious to obtain it. If, therefore, prayer is said to be unanswered it is either because, it was not made in the right spirit or, if it were, because it asked for something that our Father’s love could not allow. In that case, He will give instead what is really good for us. It follows that petitions for temporal favours, for things like health and riches and worldly success, which are not necessarily helpful in our struggle for Eternal Life, should be made only on the condition that God sees them to be a help for us and not a hindrance.’ But petitions offered for spiritual gifts, for grace to resist temptation and to advance in God’s love, for the grace of a happy death, for the extension upon earth of God’s Kingdom of Love and Peace, these must be made as they are made in the “Our Father” and “Hail Mary,” unconditionally.

May we note here, to illustrate the difference between the way in which prayer is made to the Saints and to God, that in the “Hail Mary” we ask Our Lady to intercede for us, while we pray to God in the “Our Father” as the first source of every grace.

THE EFFECTS OF PRAYER

“The effect of prayer,” says St. Thomas, “is threefold. The first is an effect which is common to all acts, quickened by charity, and this is merit.... The second effect of prayer is proper thereto, and consists in impetration.... The third effect of prayer is that which it produces at once; this is the spiritual refreshment of the mind.” The Saint is speaking, of course, of real prayer, such as we have been considering. A mere formula of prayer said inattentively and without heart is less than valueless. There is prayer only where there is devotion, that is to say, the will to pay God honour. And that implies humility.

It is important here to distinguish the twofold efficacy of prayer in respect of a future effect—merit and impetration. Merit rests on justice. An act of divine love merits a return of Divine, Eternal Love. That is why every act that proceeds from love, as prayer should, which voices the desire of the love that is poured forth by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of God’s children, merits Eternal Life. But neither prayer, nor any other good action, St. Thomas notes, is meritorious without sanctifying grace. This helps us better to realise the difference between what prayer can strictly merit, or lay claim

to in justice, and what it can effect by way of impetration. Impetration rests, not on justice, but on mercy. A sinner can merit nothing; but his prayer, by God's mercy, will still be heard. "The sinner also shall cry, and his prayer shall reach to God." Again, no one, not the greatest saint on earth, can lay claim in strict justice to the grace of a happy death. But all can ensure it, infallibly, by devout and persevering prayer.

What then, to conclude, are the conditions of prayer that it may infallibly obtain what it asks? To know them will be to have our doubts resolved as to why sometimes our prayer has not been heard. First, then, the only prayer that we can be absolutely certain will obtain the particular grace it asks is the prayer we make for ourselves. "If you ask the Father anything in My name He will give it to you," was the promise of Our Lord. At the same time, it is entirely in keeping with God's mercy and liberality that He hear the petition of His children made in the interests of others. But He has not pledged Himself to that.

Secondly, prayer, to be infallible in obtaining what it asks must be for supernatural favours, for something that will make us, or at least help to make us, happy, not for a moment merely but for eternity.

Thirdly, it must be made devoutly. Otherwise, as we have said, it would not be prayer at all.

Lastly, it must be persevering. "Pray without ceasing." "Be instant in prayer." "Blessed is the man that watcheth daily at my gates." The Scriptures and the writings of the Saints, are full of admonitions stressing the importance of persevering prayer. Ask, seek, knock—and keep on knocking.

We shall finish with the teaching of St. James: "The reason why sometimes you have asked and have not received is because you have asked amiss." St. Basil is more explicit: "It is because you have asked inconstantly, or lightly, or what was not good for you—or you have ceased asking."

May this little treatise on Prayer help at least one soul to find the Key that unlocks the Treasure-house of Peace.

Permissu Superiorum, O.P.

Nihil Obstat:

Michael Canonicus Cronin, S.T.D.,
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