

9. Its connection with the Eucharist

Since it prepares us for our meeting with God, "the sacrament can be preceded by the sacrament of Penance and followed by the sacrament of the Eucharist. As the sacrament of Christ's Passover the Eucharist should always be the last sacrament of the earthly journey, the 'viaticum' for 'passing over to eternal life'" (CCC 1517) because the Eucharist is Christ himself, and for the Christian, death as well as life is "Christocentric". If "to live is Christ", then "to die is gain" (Phil 1:21).

10. Its effects

a. "The first grace of this sacrament is one of strengthening, peace and courage to overcome the difficulties that go with the condition of serious illness or the frailty of old age. This grace is a gift of the Holy Spirit, who renews trust and faith in God and strengthens against the temptations of the evil one, the temptation to discouragement and anguish in the face of death [cf. Heb 2:15]" (CCC 1520). It "fortifies the end of our earthly life like a solid rampart for the final struggles before entering the Father's house"³ (CCC 1523).

b. "This assistance from the Lord by the power of his Spirit is meant to lead the sick person to healing of the soul, but also of the body if such is God's will"⁴ (CCC 1520).

c. "Furthermore, 'if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven'⁵" (CCC 1520).

d. "By the grace of this sacrament the sick person receives . . . the gift of uniting himself more closely to Christ's Passion. . . . Suffering, a consequence of original sin, acquires a new meaning; it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus" (CCC 1521). We are never closer to Christ and Christ's essential work, done on the Cross, than when we are dying.

"The Anointing of the Sick completes our conformity to the death and Resurrection of Christ, just as Baptism began it. It completes the holy anointings that mark the whole Christian life: that of Baptism which sealed the new life in us, and that of Confirmation which strengthened us for the combat of this life" (CCC 1523). "[J]ust as the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist form a unity called 'the sacraments of Christian initiation', so too it can be said that Penance, the Anointing of the Sick and the Eucharist as viaticum constitute at the end of Christian life 'the sacraments that prepare for our heavenly homeland'" (CCC 1525).

³ Council of Trent (1551): DS 1094.

⁴ Cf. Council of Florence (1439): DS 1325.

⁵ Jas 5:15; cf. Council of Trent (1551): DS 1717.

Chapter 9

PRAYER

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Start

1. What is prayer?

Prayer is extremely simple: it is just communication with God, conversation with God, communing with God.

Prayer can be either private or public, individual or communal. We need both kinds.

Prayer can be either informal or formal, in our own words or in the words of the saints from the many centuries of the Church's tradition. We need both kinds.

Prayer can be either vocal or silent, with words or without words. We need both kinds.

Prayer can be either active or receptive, speaking to God or listening to God (just being in his presence, waiting in love, open to his will). We need both kinds.

2. The most important thing about prayer

The most important thing about prayer is not *how* we do it but *that* we do it. The single most important answer to the question "How to pray?" is: "Begin!" "Just do it." We learn to do it by doing it, not by merely reading or thinking about doing it.

Prayer is work: a "cooperative" work of ourselves and God. We cannot do it without God, and God will not do it without us. "Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. It always presupposes effort" (CCC 2725).

"[P]rayer is a battle. Against whom? Against ourselves and against the wiles of the tempter who does all he can to turn man away from prayer, away from union with God" (CCC 2725). The battle of prayer is therefore more important—infinately more important—than any battle in military history.

3. Is prayer necessary?

Yes. One simply cannot be a Christian without prayer, any more than one can be a Christian without faith or good works. What communication is to our marriage relationship with our spouse, prayer is to our relationship with God. If we say we love God but do not pray, we lie. For love is intimacy, and intimacy is communication, and communication with God is prayer.

If God is necessary, prayer is necessary, for prayer is our spiritual lifeline to God. In prayer, we "plug in to God", the source of all good; we "charge our spiritual batteries", we feed our souls. Without prayer our souls starve.

4. Prayer and heaven

Prayer is preparation for heaven, as courtship is preparation for marriage. If Christ had to define eternal life in one word, he would probably say "prayer". For what he actually said was: "This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God" (Jn 17:3). And we know God best by prayer.

We know God better by one moment of prayer—of praise or thanks or contrition—than by a thousand books. When we only talk about him, we only know about him; when we talk *to* him, we get to know *him*.

Job got a foretaste of heaven, seeing God "face to face", because he spoke *to* God, while his three friends only spoke *about* him. Though God gave Job

no explanations for his mysterious trials, Job was satisfied because he had something infinitely better than any answer: the Answerer. He said to God: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear [secondhand], but now my eye sees you" (Job 42:5). This is what heaven is: seeing God. Prayer is its appetizer.

5. The first prerequisite for prayer: Humility

The *Catechism* speaks of three necessary prerequisites for prayer. These do not include experience or wisdom or saintliness. Prayer is for beginners and fools and sinners. But not for those devoid of humility, of love, or of faith. These are the prerequisites for prayer.

The *Catechism* speaks of humility as "the foundation of prayer" (CCC 2559). The greatest master of prayer in the Old Testament was probably Moses. God said of Moses, "'With him I speak face to face, clearly, not in riddles,' for 'Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth' [Num 12:3, 7–8]" (CCC 2576).

The human reason for humility in prayer is simply the truth that "[I]n an is a beggar before God" ¹ (CCC 2559). We should not be reluctant to confess this truth in all its force, for unless our hands are empty, God finds no place to put his gifts. When we are nothing before him, we can become everything through him.

The divine reason for humility in prayer is the truth that all our prayers, as well as their answers, are God's gifts. "*God calls man first. . . . God's initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response*" (CCC 2567). God is the First Cause of every good prayer and even of our very desire to pray. Our feeble desire for him is a tiny tongue of flame kindled by the infinite bonfire of his burning desire for us. We cannot imagine "the depths of God's desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him" ² (CCC 2566).

So our *motive* for praying, our right answer to the question "Why should I pray?" is first of all: "Because God wants it." We need it, but that is why God wants it. Even when we are conscious of no desire in us for God, we should pray to satisfy God's desire for us. Baby should eat her spinach because she needs it, but above all because Mommy wants her to. Even if Baby does not feel she needs it, she should do what Mommy says because she loves and trusts her Mommy.

Is this comparison demeaning and insulting? No, it is far too flattering.

¹ St. Augustine, *Sermo* 56, 6, 9: PL 38, 381.

² Cf. St. Augustine, *De diversis questionibus octoginta tribus* 64, 4: PL 40, 56.

The gap between Baby's wisdom and Mommy's, which requires this blind faith and trust, is nothing compared with the gap between our wisdom and God's. That is why prayer demands humility.

6. The second prerequisite for prayer: Love

"Love is the source of prayer" (CCC 2658). The attitude of "trust and obey" described in the preceding section is what love does.

Abraham is the Old Testament model of this obedient, trusting love. "When God calls him, Abraham goes forth 'as the Lord had told him' [Gen 12:4]; Abraham's heart is entirely submissive to the Word and so he obeys. Such attentiveness of the heart, whose decisions are made according to God's will, is essential to prayer, while the words used count only in relation to it. Abraham's prayer is expressed first by deeds" (CCC 2570).

The New Testament models of this love that submits and obeys are Christ and his Mother. "His exclamation, 'Yes, Father!' expresses the depth of his heart, his adherence to the Father's 'good pleasure,' echoing his mother's *Fiat*" ['Yes', 'Let it be to me according to your word'—Lk 1:38] "at the time of his conception" (CCC 2603). In this single word "Yes" to God is the heart of Christian prayer and the secret of sanctity.

The surest test of love is sacrifice. To love someone is to put the beloved's good before our own. To pray is always a sacrifice—of our time, at least, and of all the other things we could be doing during the time we pray. A sure test of your love for your spouse, your child, or your God is how much you give them of your time—that is, your lifetime, your life.

7. Prayer from the heart

"Where does prayer come from? Whether prayer is expressed in words or gestures, it is the whole man who prays. But in naming the source of prayer, Scripture speaks sometimes of the soul or the spirit, but most often of the heart (more than a thousand times)" (CCC 2562). "Heart" means something far deeper than feeling or sentiment. It means the center of my identity. "The heart is the dwelling-place where I am, where I live. . . . The heart is our hidden center, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others; only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully. The heart is the place of decision . . . where we choose life or death" (CCC 2563).

Prayer comes from our heart and God's heart, our spirit and God's Spirit: "Christian prayer . . . is the action of God and of man, springing forth from both the Holy Spirit and ourselves" (CCC 2564).

God moving us to pray does not take away our freedom because God moves us from within ourselves, not from without; by his Spirit within us,

at the heart of our own heart. He acts on us to *perfect* our freedom (for he created it!), not to remove it.

8. The third prerequisite for prayer: Faith and hope

"One enters into prayer . . . by the narrow gate of *faith* . . . and . . . *hope*" (CCC 2656–57).

But how could finite, mortal, sinful man dare to hope that the infinite, eternal, perfect God should pay attention to his prayers? It would seem far stranger than some great king caring about the lives of lice or the wishes of fishes. Yet prayer is "the union of the entire holy and royal Trinity . . . with the whole human spirit."³ Thus, the life of prayer is . . . being in the presence of the thrice-holy God and in communion with him" (CCC 2565). It is truly "amazing grace".

Who let us into that divine throne room? Christ. "This communion of life is always possible because, through Baptism, we have already been united with Christ [cf. Rom 6:5]" (CCC 2565). Christ's death on the Cross tore apart the curtain (Mt 27:51) that had closed off the "Holy of holies". This was the holiest part of the Temple and symbolized God's own dwelling place. No man was allowed to enter it except the High Priest once a year to make atonement for sin with the blood of the sacrificial lamb. Christ's death gave each one of us complete access to the highest throne room of the Trinity. He thus opened up a *radically new reality* for us and for our prayer. We could always pray, of course, and God had always loved and heard us, but sin separated us from God until Christ's death made atonement ("at-one-ment"). This "gospel" or "good news" means something good and something new about prayer, too. "What is new is to 'ask in his name' [Jn 14:13] Jesus is 'the way' [Jn 14:6]" (CCC 2614).

Not a way but *the way*. "There is no other way of Christian prayer than Christ. Whether our prayer is communal or personal, vocal or interior, it has access to the Father only if we pray 'in the name' of Jesus" (CCC 2664), by his authority, by the right his death has given us to enter God's presence. Prayer is thrice Christocentric, for Christ "prays for us as our priest, prays in us as our Head, and is prayed to by us as our God"⁴ (CCC 2610).

9. The five purposes of prayer

But what should we say to God, now that we have full access to him in Christ? The Church's tradition, based on her Jewish roots, the revealed

³ St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio*, 16, 9: PG 35, 945.

⁴ St. Augustine, *En. in Ps.* 85, 1: PL 37, 1081; cf. GILH 7.

examples of masters of prayer in Scripture, and two millennia of the wisdom of the saints, gives us five themes or purposes of prayer:

- a. adoration
- b. thanksgiving
- c. repentance
- d. intercession
- e. petition

The beginner can remember them by the acronym A TRIP. Prayer is the greatest of all trips we can take: a trip to heaven. Our spirit is already present in heaven before God when we pray. There is no distance, no separation.

10. Adoration and praise

Adoration is the first attitude of man acknowledging that he is a creature before his Creator" (CCC 2628). To adore is to acknowledge what truly is, to live in reality. We do not know God truly until we adore him. For if we know the true God, we *will* adore him and humble ourselves. Throughout Scripture, whenever man meets God—the real God—he describes it in words like these: "I fell at his feet as though dead" (Rev 1:17). He does not "chat" with God; he adores. For, as Rabbi Abraham Heschel says, "God is not an uncle; God is an earthquake."

This does not contradict what was said before about intimacy and access through Christ. We *are* intimate with God, but we are intimate with *God*. It is precisely God's greatness and holiness that make our intimacy with him so staggering. Christ's Incarnation and death did not take away God's holiness; it took away our sin. It did not make God less adorable, but us more adoring.

Adoration is a permanent psychological need. It lets us transcend ourselves, and this self-forgetfulness produces the purest joy. It enables us to turn away from ourselves and our problems, to turn all our attention to the God who is perfect beauty, letting his light shine into our darkness. For in adoration we stand with our face turned toward God, toward the light, and our backs turned toward ourselves and our darkness. The alternative is standing with our backs toward the light and our faces toward our own darkness, that is, standing in our own shadow. Even the small moon can eclipse the great sun because it is so close to the earth. Even a little problem can distract us from God because it is so close, so subjective, so much ours.

Although adoration is a psychological need, our motive for it must not be that we need it but that God deserves it. We worship not to play psychological games with ourselves but to make an honest response to reality. Only when we do this do we find joy; only when we forget ourselves do we find ourselves.

We must begin with God rather than self because "that's the way it is", that is the way reality is ordered. God is first, and to treat him as second or as a means to our ends is to reverse reality's order and to have a false God, an idol; and all idols break.

11. Thanksgiving

"The evangelists have preserved . . . explicit prayers offered by Christ during his public ministry" [Mt 11:25–27 and Lk 10:21–23]. "Each begins with thanksgiving" (CCC 2603). The same is true of the prayer given in Jn 11:41–42.

It is always healing to our spirits to "count our blessings" and thank God for everything that is good. It is also realistic, or honest to reality. For whatever means he uses—nature, family, friends, our own talents—it is God who is the First Cause of all life and goodness (and *not* of death and sin). In the poorest life there are always immeasurable riches to thank God for. Everyone's "blessing list" should include at least:

- a. Life itself and time and family and friends and our own mental and spiritual powers and the many little pleasures that are always available in this world;
- b. our very existence; for the birth of each one of us was designed and willed from eternity by the Creator (our parents were only our "pro-creators");
- c. salvation from sin and the hope of heaven; that is, infinite and unimaginable joy in intimate union with God forever;
- d. God's patient, daily grace in making us holy and good and able to enjoy him more in eternity. Even when we have few earthly gifts, we have God (sometimes, only then!). "The Giver is more precious than the gift" (CCC 2604).

Our gratitude, too, should be Christocentric. If we do not feel grateful, we should turn again to the crucifix. *That* is what God did for us. We should practice giving thanks especially when we do not feel thankful, for that is when we need to most. "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thess 5:18).

12. Repentance

"Asking forgiveness is the prerequisite for both the Eucharistic liturgy and personal prayer" (CCC 2631). We can come into God's presence only on our knees.

We should examine our conscience and confess our sins privately each day, as well as sacramentally at least each month if possible, for the same

reason we adore and give thanks: a just and proper admission of reality, of truth. In the presence of other sinful men, we may seem to be "O.K.," but in the presence of the all-holy God, honesty compels repentance, a continual "conversion" or "turning" of heart and life from our habitual self-centeredness.

We should not linger here, in contemplating our sin, or let our spirit sink into despondency or despair, but we should turn again and again to Christ and his Blood as the more-than-sufficient divine answer to our sins. "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom 5:20).

13. Intercession

"Since Abraham, intercession—asking on behalf of another—has been characteristic of a heart attuned to God's mercy. In the age of the Church, Christian intercession participates in Christ's, as an expression of the communion of saints" (CCC 2635).

It is good to keep a "prayer list" of people to intercede for daily. In addition to praying for others, we should ask others to pray for us. All men on earth need each other's help, spiritually as well as materially, especially those in authority in the Church, state, and families.

The saints in heaven no longer need our intercession, but we need theirs, and God loves to answer our prayers by glorifying his intermediaries. "We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world" (CCC 2683). Their bodies are gone from the earth *but not their love*. They are the great "cloud of witnesses" (Heb 12:1) who surround us like spectators in a stadium. The Church Triumphant in heaven, the Church Suffering in purgatory, and the Church Militant on earth are one Body in three places, united in prayer through the communion of saints.

14. Petition

Petition (asking) should not be the whole of our prayer; there are four other essential purposes. Nor should it habitually be first in time, for if it is prefaced and surrounded by adoration, thanksgiving, repentance, and intercession, it finds a place and perspective more in tune with reality.

Nevertheless, we should not try to be "high-minded" and scorn this obvious and popular purpose of prayer; for we do need many things, and God does want us to ask for them. In fact, he often withholds good things from us until we pray (petition) for them, because he sees that what we need first and most is to pray. We need to petition for the same reason we need to adore, to thank, to repent, and to intercede: to be honest to reality, to live in the truth of humility instead of the illusion of pride. For to petition is to admit

what we are: beggars. "[B]y prayer of petition we express awareness of our relationship with God. We are creatures who are not our own beginning, not the masters of adversity, not our own last end. We are sinners who as Christians know that we have turned away from our Father" (CCC 2629). Petition is not the highest kind of prayer, but precisely because it is not, it is humble and honest and thus pleasing to God.

In all five kinds of prayer, including petition, we should ask the Holy Spirit to help us to pray, for Scripture says that he "helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" [Rom 8:26] (CCC 2630).

"[E]very need can become the object of petition" (CCC 2633), for "my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:19). St. Francis of Assisi asks: "Which do you think is the more ready: God to give or we to ask?"

"To pray" means in ordinary language primarily "to petition", to ask. Thus, when Catholics "pray to" saints, they do not adore or worship them, as Protestants often charge, but merely petition them to intercede with God for us as we would petition any living friend on earth to do the same.

15. When to pray?

There are four answers: at important times, at all times, at special times, and at this time.

a. We should pray before the important things we do—usual things (such as getting up, sleeping, eating, and receiving the sacraments) as well as unusual things. In the Gospels, "Jesus prays *before* the decisive moments of his mission" (CCC 2600). For example, the Evangelists record his praying in Luke 3:21, 9:28, and 22:41–44.

b. We should pray at *all* times. St. Paul writes, "Pray constantly" (1 Thess 5:17—one of the shortest verses in the Bible, only two words). "*It is always possible to pray* . . . 'It is possible to offer fervent prayer even while walking in public or strolling alone, or seated in your shop, . . . while buying or selling, . . . or even while cooking'⁵" (CCC 2743). All of one's daily work can be offered as a prayer. *Ora et labora*, "pray and work," is the maxim of the Benedictines. Work is a prayer, and prayer is a work—in fact, the most important and lasting work we do on this earth.

c. But if we do not also make *special* times for prayer, we will not remember to pray at all times. Our lives require rhythms, structures, schedules. "Prayer . . . ought to animate us at every moment. But we tend to forget him who is our life and our all. . . . We must remember God more often than

⁵ St. John Chrysostom, *Elogia de oratione* 2: PG 63, 585.