

### **Personal Reflections on Prayer**

A living commitment, “Christian prayer is a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ. It is the action of God and of man, springing forth from both the Holy Spirit and ourselves, wholly directed to the Father, in union with the human will of the Son of God made man.”<sup>1</sup>

The Catechism assumes a theology of Incarnation, with Christ the God-Man personifying the covenantal relationship within which we “live and move and have our being.”<sup>2</sup> In a sense now God’s offspring<sup>3</sup> we understand that he is everything to us, and in echoing the “firstborn of all creation,”<sup>4</sup> we are everything to God. In this uniquely preeminent relationship that transcends and shatters all attempts to thoroughly define it, to fully know and be known by God even in the fullest Biblical sense is what Incarnation is all about, and what it makes possible through prayer – to actualize union with God.

For a Christian prayer is everything, for without it our lives cannot attain to true happiness, in which our hearts are full of the Holy Spirit. Rather the opposite can occur and we can find ourselves in but one religious philosophy among others, replete with a pointless morass of restrictive legislation.

For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.<sup>5</sup>

Though defining prayer itself, St. Therese’s famous quote does much to also unpack its all-encompassing importance. In “embracing both trial and joy” with equanimity, our “cry of

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<sup>1</sup> CCC 2564.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 17:28.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Col 1:15.

<sup>5</sup> CCC 2558.

recognition” brings the love of God to our minds and hearts. Prayer gives us hope in trial, gratitude in joy, and reveals the church’s teachings not as a mere set of rules and regulations, but parameters within which the free confines of grace may thrive. These two polarities are also a natural starting point from which to reflect upon the specific prayer forms of *petition*, and *praise*.

Petitionary prayer is the “most usual form,” by which “we express awareness of our relationship with God.”<sup>6</sup> Because of a fundamental tendency to miss the mark and turn away from our spiritual lives, this type of prayer represents a turning back to God through forgiveness,<sup>7</sup> that in seeking to align ourselves with the will of God, we may bring every need into prayer, even at all times.

*“Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!”<sup>8</sup>*

In crying out from “the depths,” the psalmist knows that God is Creator, and he the creature. This is why he supplicates and does not demand, for he knows that forgiveness and inevitable redemption follow from *humility*.

The significance of petitionary prayer for all who pray is inextricable from how it is experienced in the church, both communally and individually. While humility denotes being modest and respectful, I offer that it is best understood as *right self-realization*. If we are humble, we know who and what we are and are not, and remain unperturbed.

*“Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>9</sup>* According to Jesus, to petition God is to be unilaterally aligned with the divine will. All else flows from

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<sup>6</sup> CCC 2629.

<sup>7</sup> CCC 2631.

<sup>8</sup> Ps 130:1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Mt 6:10.

this, and humility from the Crucified is well established. A lack of humility and subsequent incapacity to seek a completely God-centered, detached outcome to prayer is what sometimes keeps prayers from being answered in a recognizable manner. If we lack the self-knowledge that humility brings, there are also times when prayer may not seem to have been answered at all.

Yet in God the answer is always an eternal “Yes,” even if it occurs as a temporal negation. Humility admits the possibility that the thing we think we want points the way toward that which we really need, thereby satisfying many wants as an afterthought. God will be God, and he will show up not when he is ready (for he is always ready), but when, consciously or not, we are most prepared to receive what is coming.

Without claiming to have acquired humility, I will offer this much – any prayerful relationship with God, especially in ministry, must come with a willingness to do whatever is necessary. If you ask God for knowledge of his will, make sure you are willing to live it with your life.

This is no grim endeavor, but a life of high adventure. There is joy, too, in the will of God! To joyfully live life and praise God for granting right knowledge will not only lighten the burden of suffering under which petitionary prayer can often take place, but is the proper due for prayers answered. In petitions we acknowledge that we are not God. In praise, we recognize “that God is God.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> CCC 2639.

*“Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful. Let Israel be glad in its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.”<sup>11</sup>*

Because “HE IS,” we share “in the blessed happiness” of the faithful who “love God in faith before seeing him in glory.”<sup>12</sup> This is union with God in progress. From finitude toward the Infinite, by praise “the Spirit is joined to our spirits to bear witness that we are children of God.”<sup>13</sup> Praise furthermore embraces all the “other forms of prayer and carries them toward him who is its source and goal: the ‘one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist.’”<sup>14</sup>

*“Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! Let everything that breathes praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!”<sup>15</sup>*

“Whenever we give thanks and find joy in God’s presence, we are not carefully singling out one particular aspect for praise. Our heart knows we are keeping jubilee for all God has done.”<sup>16</sup> Praising God is of utmost intrinsic value, and indicates the phenomenon of possible and actual humility transfiguring and being transfigured into *gratitude*. There is no greater gift to give or receive than a grateful heart. Gratitude contextualizes suffering, embracing and in memory purifying it into the very basis out of which praise itself is incarnated.

The church praises and responds to God through praying the liturgy, physically and visually through architecture and art, and in all ways through the Eucharist and one another. From individual Christians, specific reasons for praise will always be innumerably motivated. I most authentically praise God for his astonishing condescension in revealing himself, and

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<sup>11</sup> Psalm 149:1.

<sup>12</sup> CCC 2639.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> CCC 2639, cf. 1 Cor 8:6.

<sup>15</sup> Psalm 150: 1-2, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Casey, OCSO, *Toward God: The Ancient Wisdom of Western Prayer* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 1996), 86.

getting to know me at all. In one infinitesimal outpouring of grace, he provided me with a monastic formation and a priestly vocation, for which I can never be grateful enough.

“For the blessed in heaven, their normal prayer may be one of praise; for us who are travelers on the way, more often it is the prayer of petition.”<sup>17</sup> While this is true, the luminous mysteries of the rosary remind us that it is not always about either sorrow or joy, but sometimes light breaks in and fills the ordinary with a presence or at least mindfulness of glory.

Some of my best prayers have been under the harshest circumstances, particularly related to vocational discernment. I would never have believed that the agony of living through a less than ideal fit in the cloister, would cauterize into legitimately discerning that God was calling me to leave the Trappists and monastic life. Yet this was only to continue into apostolic and priestly formation as a Salvatorian, thereby validating the experience as foundational. While genuinely willing to persevere in the desert, God chose instead to lift me out into the possibility of something I had forgotten about and stopped considering – *happiness*.

A tried and maturing union with God through prayer is the most meaningful relationship one could have, for it assumes one has learned to integrate and relate with one’s self. Any relationship including and beyond that, which doesn’t incorporate and build upon happiness, is not worth having. A dynamic and omni-faceted phenomenon, I currently understand happiness in God as a byproduct of magnified achievement combined with open-ended interior liberty. To be ordered and free, evenly balanced between petition and praise, is to live in the paradox that is God in creation.

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<sup>17</sup> Eugene McCaffrey, OCD, *Patterns of Prayer* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 76.

He is who he is, I am not, and in spite and because of this I know that suffering is impermanent, praise is inevitable, and the one leads out into the other. If I need more thorough petitions prior to the sought after breakthroughs into praise, at least there will be different, and possibly better, questions.