

## Prayer (*January 2018*)

The Christian life is essentially a life of union with God; but to make a relationship work it takes two people. The liturgical year reminds us of those great things God did for us to restore His loving relationship with us: we celebrate His incarnation, passion and death, His resurrection and ascension, the sending of the Holy Spirit. We remember with gratitude that He gave us the Holy Scripture, Holy Church and the Sacraments. In Baptism He infused in us the gifts of faith, hope and charity; in the Eucharist He continues to dwell among us and unites Himself with us; in the sacrament of Confession He restores us to our baptismal innocence; He inspires and strengthens us with His grace. He is really doing everything to “make this relationship work.”

But what about us? What should be our answer to such generous love? What can we do to deepen our relationship with God? We must pray. But this seemingly simple answer hides a lot of difficulties, because it is not easy to pray! Even the most fervent, honest Christians struggle to have a proper prayer life, and that is because too often we do not know what prayer is; on the contrary, we have a lot of misconceptions regarding prayer.

Many Christians say their prayers morning and night, in church, some even before meals, but most of these prayers are fixed texts learned during childhood, in great part consisting of asking for something, and rarely do they have anything to do with our daily lives or personal circumstances. Often in these prayers there is an underlying, incorrect image of God: He is somebody distant (“up there somewhere”) who for some reason requires us to say prayers regularly. So we obey and, often distractedly, recite some prayers.

The first step towards a truly Christian prayer life is to have a correct image of God. It is true that “He dwells in unapproachable light” (I Tim. 6.16), is of infinite majesty, is absolutely transcendent and inconceivable; but He is also God- with us, Emmanuel. Especially at the beginning of our spiritual life, when we pray we should have in front of our eyes (mentally – or even physically, if it helps) the image of Jesus. God, while dwelling eternally in heaven, is also near us; God once walked among us and is now present in the Eucharist; though being inconceivable, He Himself teaches us through the Gospels. God in Jesus Christ revealed Himself as a loving, caring presence, and this is how we should think about Him, especially during prayer. Prayer shouldn’t be seen as an obligation but as a chance to discover God’s presence in our life.

Another misconception is that prayer is mostly about petition. Consequently we pray more earnestly in moments of need, while in other times, when everything is all right, we are less keen on prayer; and also, when our prayer seems not to be answered we become discouraged and easily give up on prayer. Now whilst it is important to ask both for ourselves and for others, petition is just one of the necessary elements of Christian prayer.

S. John Damascene says that prayer is “the lifting up of the mind to God.” Normally our mind is occupied with many things, important or unimportant. We are easily tempted to bring these thoughts (at least the ones we *think* are important) to God in prayer. But the first step towards Christian prayer is putting all these thoughts aside. We do not come to God in prayer to say things, or to inform or update Him, not even to “say prayers” or to meditate “in His presence”; we do not come to God in prayer to think or to rest or to ask; we do not come to find consolation or strength or help or counsel. We come to God to find Him, to be with Him. It is because of Him, who He is, how He is, that we want to pray. As the Psalmist says: “My heart hath talked of Thee, seek ye My face; Thy face, Lord, will I seek.” (27.9). Everything else is secondary.

S. Augustine of Hippo writes: *Fecisti nos ad Te, et inquietum est cor nostrum donec quiescat in Te* (“Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”) We were created to enter into intimate relationship with God through prayer, but sin happened, so praying has become difficult for us. Putting our thoughts, joys and preoccupations aside is not easy. We have to

learn and practise it. Prayer, on our part, requires preparation, perseverance and practice.

There are some simple, practical things that can facilitate prayer. It is important that we give sufficient time to prayer, every day, preferably at the same time of day. We should give to prayer the part of the day when we are at the top of our strength, when we are not too tired, sleepy, hungry or in a rush. And do not start right away with prayer. It is almost impossible to switch to prayer from watching TV, talking to friends, surfing the net, reading a book or fighting the Cambridge traffic. The first few minutes should serve to create silence around and inside us, putting aside all that occupies our thoughts. Try to create a special place for prayer (with whatever helps you: a cross, icon or candle) where you can be sure that you won't be disturbed by people, phone or your cats, and where you are comfortable (kneeling on the floor for hours in pain in a cold and dark church is not for everybody).

Prayer will be different for every person, and it will change with time even in the same person. Prayer may involve speech or be silent, meditative or contemplative, asking or waiting; but its essence must always be the same: lovingly seeking the face of the Lord. This "simple act" of seeking the face of the Lord – prayer, that is – has four parts: adoration, thanksgiving, confession and petition. These four elements help our prayer be about God first of all, and not just about us, our needs.

1) **Adoration.** Adoration is the first and most important element of every prayer. Adoration means that the soul knows into whose presence it has come: God the Eternal King, Creator and Lord. Yes, God is our Father who in His love allows us and desires of us a great familiarity; but He is also God: this familiarity must be characterised by love, respect, fear, adoration. Even the purest seraphim, burning with love for God, cover their faces in His presence (Isaiah 6.2). Yes, in Jesus Christ God humbled Himself to the manger and the cross; but this made Him even more adorable, and gave Him a Name at which "every knee should bow" (Phil. 2.1). Also, adoration means that we are loving God not because of something He has done or made but we are loving Him for Himself. He Himself is Holiness, Love, Beauty. It might be helpful after having created silence around us to read parts of Holy Scripture that describe God's glory (e.g. Isaiah 6.1-8; Psalm 24.7-8; Revelation 19.1-16; Habakkuk 2.3-7; Ezekiel 1.22-28; Revelation 15.1-8; II Samuel 22.5-16; Ezekiel 10.). We can also try to address God with the words that the Church uses in her Liturgy (for example: "Almighty and everlasting God", "Most merciful Lord", "Thou who dost govern all things in heaven and earth", "O God the King of glory", "Lord of all power and might").

2) **Thanksgiving.** Thanksgiving which flows from adoration means that our prayer is still concentrating on God and not on us, our needs. The most dangerous error we can fall into is to limit thanksgiving to the personal blessings we have received from God and to the occasions when our prayer has been answered. And this is a danger for two reasons. Firstly because if we do so, our thanksgiving will be limited and will decrease over time, and will eventually disappear. And secondly, this narrow view of God's gifts will never be sufficient to increase joy and the virtues of faith, hope and love in us. Our thanksgiving must start with God. We thank God first of all for Himself: for His beauty, love, mercy, justice, majesty, wisdom, providence. We thank Jesus for His incarnation, teaching, passion and death, resurrection, glory; we thank Him for the Sacraments, especially for the Eucharist; we thank the Holy Spirit for His dwelling in us, for his gifts of grace and supernatural life. Only then do we give thanks for the gifts He has bestowed on us, our family, our friends. Thanksgiving so conceived (also called praise) will help us to see God's continuous, generous love for us, without taking anything for granted, and also will lead to joy, and will increase our faith, hope and love.

3) **Penitence.** Adoring God and giving Him thanks helps us to see ourselves in the correct light, to see our nothingness and sinfulness. Its fruits are clear: humility and penitence. Fruits that make our prayer pleasing and precious in the eyes of God, as Scripture says: "The prayer of him that humbleth himself shall pierce the clouds" (Ecclesiasticus 35.21). Seeing the gravity of our sins

makes us appreciate God's love, mercy, forgiveness and all His other gifts more; it kindles our love and strengthens our hope. We will call to mind the parable of Jesus about the publican praying in the Temple (Luke 18.9-14).

4) **Petition.** The first three elements help us to articulate our petitions correctly: they will not be demands any more as if we had any right to ask God for anything. Adoration, thanksgiving and penitence make us recognise that God is everything and we are less than nothing without Him. All we are and all we have come from Him. So our greatest and ultimate need is God Himself. We need Him far more than his gifts, and in Him we have everything else. And this is what true prayer must lead us to and be about: to desire God with all our heart and soul, with all our strength and mind (Luke 10.27). This desire will help us to ask for the right things and it will give the right order and importance to our other petitions. Also, it will make us understand that we must ask for even what we have and what we take for granted. While recovery from sickness, help in financial difficulty, finding a job or getting good results in our exams are all rightful petitions, they are not the most important ones. After desiring God, we must ask for spiritual goods: God's grace, perseverance in good, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, virtues, being preserved from sin, the grace of final perseverance and of a good and holy death. All the rest comes second.

It comes naturally to pray for the needs of those we love. Hopefully the needs of Holy Church are on our list too. Very rarely, however, do we remember to pray for our enemies, for those who have done wrong to us. But there can be no sincere prayer without observing the commandment of Jesus: "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you" (Matthew 5.44).

Let me finish with a brief note on fixed prayers. It might seem from all that I have written above that they are not good or not useful. Yet this couldn't be further from the truth. While our prayers cannot consist only of fixed prayers, they are very important for two reasons. First, they connect us with the universal Church, with Christians of all times and places. We are never alone when we are praying. Second, they enrich our prayer life by teaching us how to pray, what words to use, they create in us a correct (theological, spiritual, devotional) image of God.