

# PRAYING FOR GOD

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FOR  
GOD

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## English Edition

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## **PRAYING FOR GOD**

Like little children learning to talk, people learn to pray by praying, not by reading a book on the subject. Likewise, those who do not pray will probably not be enticed to do so by reading a treatise on prayer.

Why then a book about prayer?

Why does a nightingale sing? What is it trying to tell us? Or does it sing without a "why"?

Perhaps I write about prayer not to convince others to pray but to keep myself from being convinced not to pray.

And so in this book I am parleying with myself, and you may eavesdrop.

### **Is Praying lost time?**

What about prayer? Is it time lost in religious illusion?

A man making his way across the desert became terribly thirsty. Presently he saw palm trees, a fountain, and a woman drawing water, but he was no fool. He had read about *fata morgana*, the seductive mirages that appear in the Sahara.

So he passed by this pleasant place without stopping. Why should he waste time investigating a mere illusion?

He was found dead of thirst not far from an oasis.

There are mirages in the desert, but there are also life-giving oases as real as the one who views them.

It is necessary to be aware of both.

Nasruddin Hogeia, a Turkish wise man who, in his wisdom, wore the garb of a fool, was observed by friends to be tossing yogurt into the sea.

When asked to explain his behavior, he replied, "When you add yogurt to milk, it turns into yogurt, thus greatly increasing its value. Yogurt fetches a far higher price than milk."

The friends chided him: "This is true of milk, but not sea-water. You cannot change sea-water into yogurt."

"I know this only too well," replied Nasruddin Hogeia, "but it is still worth a try. At the worst, I lose some yogurt. But can anyone calculate what a boon it would be if all the water in the sea became my yogurt? No one in the world would be as rich as I."

Many doubt that prayer has any practical value. A man gets what he wants by going after it or by speaking to others about his wants, not by appealing to an unseen or perhaps nonexistent God.

Suppose that is so. Still, if there is only one millionth of a chance that my prayer could be fulfilled, isn't it worth the gamble? The chances of winning the jackpot at a lottery are also minimal. But some do win.

I would say prayer is worth a try, in fact, repeated tries. And if that is too risky, then perusing a book about prayer may at least be worth a try.

Can one be absolutely sure that prayer is time lost and energy squandered? The history of human thought

is a cemetery full of stupidities once considered certainties. Could the negation of prayer fall into the same category? Is there no hope of its efficacy? Curiously, the Bible speaks about a rare and exquisite virtue: to hope against hope. (Romans 4:18)

### **Could we not also be mistaken?**

For the sake of argument, let us indulge in this kind of hope. But first let us examine just a few instances of how falsely leading authorities have reasoned over the years. Their woeful example might help overcome any reluctance to accept the idea of prayer.

About population: "The population of the earth decreases every day, and, if this continues, in another ten centuries the earth will be nothing but a desert"—*Montesquieu, 1743.*

About anesthesia: The abolishment of pain in surgery is a chimera. It is absurd to go on seeking it today. *Knife* and *pain* are two words in surgery that must forever be associated in the consciousness of the patient. To this compulsory combination we shall have to adjust ourselves"—*Dr. Alfred Velpeau, 1839.*

About invention: "The advancement of the arts from year to year taxes our credulity and seems to presage the arrival of that period when further improvement must end"—*Henry L. Ellsworth, U.S. Commissioner of Patents, 1844.*

About the West: "I have never heard of anything, and I cannot conceive of anything more ridiculous, more absurd, and more affrontive to all sober judgment

than the cry that we are profiting by the acquisition of New Mexico and California. I hold that they are not worth a dollar!"—*Daniel Webster, Senate speech, 1848.*

About world collapse: "My figures coincide in fixing 1950 as the year when the world must go to smash" — *Henry Adams, 1903.*

About aviation: "The demonstration that no possible combination of known substances, known forms of machinery, and known forms of force can be united in a practical machine by which man shall fly long distances through the air, seems to the writer as complete as it is possible for the demonstration of any physical fact to be" — *Simon Newcomb, Astronomer, 1903.*

About the atomic bomb: "That is the biggest foolish thing we have ever done. The bomb will never go off, and I speak as an expert in explosives" — *Admiral William D. Leahy to President Truman, 1945.*

About the automobile: The first inventor of the automobile, Siegfried Marrens, was arrested in 1875 in Vienna for disturbing the peace of the city by the noise and fumes of his car, a completely useless thing.

Now, about prayer: If you think it useless, listen to these voices of the past and ask yourself if you want to risk joining their company. At least be willing to read about prayer, especially since this book is adventurous.

It speaks not alone about prayer *to* God, but also prayer *for* God!

## **Prayer for God?**

Those who pray usually have personal needs in

mind. They also pray for others. Should they pray for God as well? If this thought is mind-boggling, let's see if there are some precedents.

When Dr. Arnold Rikli, an Austrian, first recommended solar baths as curative in 1865 his colleagues decried him as a quack.

When the Virgin Mary was with child, both she and Joseph knew that the "holy thing" was God incarnate. They knew His real name, by which He was never called in public, but which was prophesied by Isaiah: *Immanuel*, which means "God is with us."

They knew another prophecy in which He is called the "Mighty God." (Isaiah 9:6) He who bore such awesome names was in Mary's womb. Soon He was held in the arms of His earthly parents and cradled near them.

It is certainly reasonable to suppose they prayed for Him, especially when He was in danger of death. Doubtless many prayers ascended for Him as a child facing the ambiguities of His parentage and perhaps the taunts of His brothers and His peers.

Mary, we are told, was with her Son at the foot of the cross. Surely she prayed for Him when He was scorned, whipped, tormented, reviled. When she heard the terrible cry, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?", did she shudder at the thought that her blessed Son failed to trust His heavenly Father's commission? How earnestly she must have prayed that His faith be strengthened!

Nor would she have been the only one to pray for

Him. There were others who loved Him, who had been close to Him, who had experienced or witnessed His miracles, who had been drawn by His warmth and love and exalted His teachings. Had not Jesus taught them they should pray to God about all their worries? Surely they would not have excluded Him from their daily prayers!

When Joseph of Arimathea attended to His burial, doubtless he intoned the Jewish ritual prayer asking that He find rest in paradise.

The whole Psalm 72 is a prayer for Christ.

It starts with the words "Give the king Your judgments, O God". Now which king is meant?

We are told that this king "shall have dominion....to the ends of the earth." (v.8) "All nations shall serve Him." (v.11) "He will save the souls of the needy". (v.13) "All nations shall call Him blessed." (v.17)

Obviously the subject of this psalm is not king Solomon who wrote it. He did not have such universal ambitions. Interpreters are unanimous to consider that this psalm speaks about Christ's reign.

Now in v. 13 it is written "Prayer will be made for Him, this King who is the Messiah, continually."

Could it have been said clearer that believers will pray not only to Christ but also for Christ?

Can one pray for God? Should one?

Christians pray for themselves and for their brethren in the faith. Jesus says, "You are gods..." (John 10:34) Do gods pray for themselves? If so, what do they pray for? St. Paul writes that Christians are complete in Christ.

(Colossians 2:10) What do complete beings look for? What do they have to demand? Paul also says that Christ dwells within us. That being so, does not every true prayer concern the well-being of God in me and in others?

As for the heavenly Father Himself, the church for thousands of years has prayed that He might do what is good for Himself that He might have a good name, that His will be done. Jesus taught us to pray in this manner. Surely these are prayers *for* God.

But is not prayer for God unreasonable? So what if it is unreasonable? St Paul wrote about "the foolishness of God," (I Corinthians 1:25) without fearing that this might be blasphemy.

The Talmud even goes so far as to say that God puts on phylacteries every morning and prays that His compassion might overcome His justice. Again foolishness! To whom would He pray?

I might pray that people who are foolish become reasonable. But does God need us to pray *for* Him because there is foolishness in Him? Does this question itself seem foolish, or even blasphemous? If so, it follows from the saying of St. Paul, who was a chosen apostle, not a blasphemer.

Jesus taught us to become like children. I once heard my grandson Alex, when he was six, praying for God. "God, please take care of Daddy, Mommy, and my sister. And take good care of Yourself because if something bad happens to you, we'll all be in big trouble."

Is it right to pray this way?

G. K. Chesterton shared his insight into the matter: "The whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand. The morbid logician seeks to make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious. The mystic allows one thing to be mysterious, and everything else becomes lucid."

A multitude who had learned from Jesus to pray that God's kingdom should come, acknowledging that Jesus was God, prayed to Him to become king. They must have insisted, and He refused. In the end He fled. To what avail then are prayers for the coming of His kingdom?

What if He refuses to the very end?

A long time after this refusal, we find St. John, who knew that Jesus had avoided being made a king, praying that He might have glory and dominion. (Revelation 1:6) God's priesthood prays *for* God.

I am a Romanian. Our king, Michael I, was dethroned by the Communists without consulting the people. I love him and pray that he might regain his throne. This is surely a prayer *for* the king.

When the apostle Jude concludes his epistle with the words. "To God our Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and for evermore," (v. 25) is it not a prayer *for* God? It is, though praying for Him is folly.

In a Nazi concentration camp, three Jews were hanged, one of them a child, named by his fellow-inmates, "the angel with sad eyes."

When they were on the gallows, the grownups shouted, "Long live liberty!" The child was silent. The adults died immediately, but the child continued to have convulsions for a long time. Perhaps those who prepared the noose had trembling hands and did a poor job.

One Jew whispered to his neighbor, "Where is God in this picture?"

The other replied, "He is right here, in the child."

He is in all who suffer innocently.

Would you have prayed for this child? Would you have recognized Godhead in him? Should we pray for God?

Why did God not intervene? Why is He so powerless? Because He took upon Himself the weaknesses of millions of men during the whole course of human history. "He Himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses." (Matthew 8:17) What can we expect from a God so burdened?

Let us pray that we may overcome our own weaknesses. This will then be a prayer that God will be able to show His might.

### **Give a voice to your unreasonableness**

I once dreamt in Trinidad that I said to two friends, "If in prayer you think that six divided by nine is nine, say it. Express everything in prayer, including your folly."

Folly acknowledged and expressed is the key to initiation.

Everyone has a measure of madness within him, but it need not spoil one's relationship with his fellow men. Tell it to God in prayer, which needs not be reasonable.

For many centuries, the Catholic church prayed in Latin, a language not understood by the people. When at Vatican Council II, the church made the reasonable decision to use the vernacular in order to be understood, people realized that reason is not satisfied with these prayers. Half the Catholics stopped going to mass when it was given to them in their own language.

Many of them embraced the charismatic movement, with its speaking in unintelligible tongues—an expression of the unintelligibility of God's designs and of the fact that reason often remains without a reply to its queries in prayer.

Few charismatics know theology, but they arrived intuitively at what is called in theology the apophatic way—the way of denial, as explained by Nikolai Cusa: *Attingitur inattingibile inattingibiliter* — “The unattainable can be attained through attaining its unattainability.”

Prayer cannot be reasonable because the man who prays is not reasonable and because prayer is obviously identical with the pray-er, the person who prays.

In Sanskrit this is expressed through the word *brahman*. If used for prayer, the accent is on the first syllable, and if for the pray-er, on the second.

In the Hebrew of Psalm 109:4, David says, “I am prayer.”

David, a man with many contradictions, follies, and tempests, says he is prayer. How can we expect his

prayers, considered as models by the synagogue and the church, to be reasonable?

I started to pray over fifty years ago. Though I have prayed every day since, prayers is still a mystery for me. I do not claim to teach you something about prayer. Whoever does is wiser than St. Paul, who wrote, "We do not know what we should pray for." (Romans 8:26)

The purpose of this book is to bring you into the atmosphere of mystery, until you consider yourself at home in it, without waiting to get explanations for everything that puzzles or defies reason.

In prayer, as in other matters, it is not necessary to understand everything. God has hidden from us many truths about nature. We do not even know what an atom is, though we harness its energy. We do not understand our understanding which has to understand the atom. How will we understand God when our understanding is so much an *under*-standing.

There must be sense in the first petitions of "Our Father, Hallowed be Thy Name" and "Thy Kingdom come," a sense we cannot catch because we really don't know much about how God is.

He must be somehow like the best of His saints. Maximilian Kolbe who gave his life for Christ in the death camp Auschwitz said, "I would like to pass through this world without leaving a trace." They all tried to efface themselves. As far as possible, they did good anonymously. You had to coerce them to receive some recognition. If God is something like this, the prayer "Hallowed be your name" becomes justified.

David had been anointed king of Israel but did not move a finger to really ascend the throne. It was alright for him that wicked Saul, his enemy should reign. David had no ambition to replace him. When Saul died, David instead of jubilating about it, composed an eulogy to his honor, an eulogy for one who had tried several times to kill him.

David is called in the Bible "a man after God's heart." Then the insistent prayer addressed to God for God, "Thy Kingdom come," is surely justified.

Saints might teach and advise but don't coerce. Usually, they are not listened to. They must be begged to see their will, which is the right course, should be fulfilled. Therefore we pray to God for God, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

In prayer we tend toward a reality very different than that usually perceived.

I don't claim to understand it. I don't pretend to make you understand it. In these matters, the word of St. Paul applies: "If anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know." (I Corinthians 8:2)

Don't expect many explanations from me! My purpose is only to bring you into the atmosphere of mystery.

I wonder why we call reality only what a brain considers as such, when we know the mind lies to us about reality every night in dreams, dissembles to us through illusions, is deformed by complexes, manias, neuroses, and psychoses, because of its suggestibility

swallows all kinds of stupidities propagated with skill, can have its thinking processes distorted with drugs and poisons, and can be deformed by trauma or sickness. The mind is not man's best friend.

We don't know why some minds find it easy to pray. Sometimes these same minds doubt their very own prayers. Sometimes they even turn about and renounce their former life of prayer. These same minds can then return to a life of prayer. And yet rarely does an individual draw the conclusion that he cannot trust his own mind in any of these phases. Such a man simply prays, disregarding the opinions of his mind.

We will continue to pray to the King of kings, "Thy kingdom come" and will acknowledge a moment later that the prayer was meaningless by adding, "Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory" already. This being the case, we will nevertheless find ourselves soon repeating, "Our Father who art in heaven,... Thy Kingdom come." We ourselves cannot understand why we do this.

St. Therese of Avila wrote in *The Interior Castle*: "Prayer consists not in thinking much but in loving much."

Prayer is a relationship between two beings in love. Therese of Lisieux says that "prayer is a transport of the heart,... a cry of love in the midst of trials or of joy."

It is common to unite our hands in prayer, but the highest form of prayer is the uniting of two pairs of lips. The bride in Solomon's Song says, "Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His lips." *Proskuneo*, the Greek word

for "to worship," was used for "to kiss."

Be wary of a conversation between lovers that is reasonable and strictly logical. There is folly in the words of lovers.

The Bible is the only holy book of any religion that speaks about a folly of God. What kind of lover would He be without a dose of folly? Doubtless many considered King Edward VIII of Britain and King Charles II of Romania foolish to renounce their thrones to marry divorced women. How much greater is God's folly to give His only begotten Son to be crucified for common sinners.

Therese of Avila says that in "the prayer of union" there is only rejoicing "unaccompanied by any understanding of the thing in which the soul is rejoicing." It has to be so because "in this rejoicing all the senses are occupied."

He whose mind still works in prayer, taking care that the limits of logic and reasonableness not be breached, has not yet prayed with his whole being.

In the prayer of union the censor of the mind and the censored have united to worship God. Nothing remains but worship.

Logical construction in prayer presupposes concern with the method rather than the object of prayer. Accept incoherence and contradiction. The Lover understands His beloved.

I come back to my question: Should we pray *for* God?

When I see a man in danger, I pray that he might be

rescued. I see God in danger. His name is scorned, hundreds of His Churches are destroyed, thousands of His believers are imprisoned and killed. The whole Bible is a long story of the sufferings of God. He says about Himself that He is crushed, (Ezekiel 6:9) wearied, (Malachi 2:17) and has been expelled from His sanctuary. (Ezekiel 8:6) I would pray for any man who is in such a deplorable situation. Should we not pray for God when He is deep in sorrow?

Surely we would pray for the rescue or at least the soothing of the pains of a man crucified. Yet we know that Jesus is crucified afresh by the sins of those who have once known Him. (Hebrews 6:6) Should we leave Him without praying for Him?

When God lives in us, it is no more we who live, but He in us. We are changed more and more into His likeness. If I pray for a Christian, I pray that what is of God in him might grow. But I misspeak. It is not something *of* God which lives in a Christian: it is God Himself.

The Bible tells us to magnify God, (Psalm 34:31) which means in good English to make Him become greater. Through a spectrograph inserted in a space telescope, objects 100 million times more faint than can be seen with the naked eye can be recorded. The spectrograph magnifies them.

We wish the magnification of God. He is in a mysterious heaven, inaccessible to human senses. But He can be brought nearer. The incarnation of the Son of the God, who is the express image of His person was

a step toward this. The unseen God became visible somehow. He becomes more and more visible in the life of every saint. Prayer is also a means of magnifying God. Why then should we use other means and neglect prayer? Should I not pray for God who dwells in my brother or sister, to grow and become more discernible?

Well, there is a measure of madness in every one of us, and this is true also of our prayers. What I wrote above is sheer folly. Why *should* we pray for God? But, first of all, why should we pray at all?

### **Wrong Prayers**

Some prayers might just as well be discarded.

In *Itthasmala*, a collection of Hindu legends, there is the following charming story:

A yogi told a Brahmin that he was on his way to meet God.

"Then tell Him," cried the Brahmin, "of the wretched poverty of my wife, my son, and myself, and implore His deliverance."

This the yogi promised and did. And God said, "If each shall wish, immediately after bathing, their desires shall be granted."

Upon hearing from the yogi this good news, the wife hastened to bathe and to wish for youth and beauty, rich adornment and raiment. And these were hers by an instant transformation. So fair and affluent she looked that she was coveted by a Mohammedan, who had her seized and set beside him in his carriage.

At this calamity, the son ran to his bath and wished

that his mother might turn into a pig, for then the Mohammedan would spurn her and thrust her away. This also came to pass.

The Brahmin, in anguish, bathed and wished, "Oh, let us be as we were!" and thereafter murmured at his poverty no more.

Does not the fulfillment of prayer sometimes lead to worse things than what went before? Real experiences of life—not only a quaint legend—reveal this to be the case.

King Midas of old, greedy for riches, obtained through prayer the power to turn everything he touched to gold. He almost died of hunger when even food was transmuted. No one can live on gold alone, any more than one can live on bread alone. Many prayers are for one exclusive boon which, without others, is worthless.

During World War II, the Christians of one country prayed against those in other countries. The result was that all prayers were fulfilled. The British, Italian and French empires disappeared. Germany was torn in two, its "thousand-year Reich" crushed. Russia was destroyed as far as Stalingrad and lost 22 million men. Jews and Christians alike were herded into concentration camps; six million Jews perished, likewise gypsies. Two Japanese cities were annihilated by atomic bombs before the emperor surrendered. Since the cessation of hostilities, the U.S.A. has been increasingly threatened by forces within and without.

This is not an argument against prayer, but against wrong prayer. The fact that fire burns houses and barns,

forests and fields, is not an argument against fire but against the evil use of it.

### **Value of prayer**

There exist religions without prayer. Buddhists do not believe in a Creator God, but in a mystic harmony of the universe. They regard this impersonal principle with awe and reverence but not as something to be placated or petitioned.

Even Buddhist sects that credit the divine power with such personal attributes as wisdom and compassion do not believe in petitioning this power for personal favors. Its altruism is assumed. Therefore petitions are superfluous. Since the power's wisdom is perfect, it would be foolish to seek to impose human will through prayer.

Buddhism maintains that the individual and this transcendent power are one. They strive to meditate on this oneness rather than praying in an "I/Thou" relationship.

The German philosopher Kant maintained a similar view: "It is an absurd and presumptuous illusion to try to distract God from the plan of His intelligence through the impertinent daring of prayers in order to obtain a momentary advantage."

Is it reasonable to reject prayer because it would be impertinent or unreasonable? Is it reasonable only to do things that are reasonable? There is also the sphere of the emotions. Neglected sentiments often appear as brutality and can destroy the destroyer.

What is reasonable about crying for pain or shouting for joy?

Goethe rejected the whole philosophy of Kant because it arises totally from the intellect. "It enriches thought, but does not makes us better." All unilateral intellectualism leads to mockery, sarcasm, and cynicism.

Two friends walked along the shore of the ocean. One slipped in the water and, in danger of drowning, shouted, "Help! I cannot swim!"

The friend on the shore reproved him: "Neither do I know how to swim, but for this I don't shout and trouble other people."

Those in turmoil will always shout, whether or not what they do is reasonable.

Men will pray as long as sadness and joy, dangers and crises exist. Life knows more than rationalist philosophies or religions. Prayer simply belongs to life.

Lenin was a militant hater of the notion of God and of the church, both of which he persecuted. He fought against any religious idea.

But in 1918 the new Communist state in Russia was on the brink of disaster. Counter-revolutionist armies ruled vast territories. Even Petrograd, the capital, was encircled by the anti-Bolshevik army of Kornilov.

Then and only then did Lenin deliver a speech before the local Soviet, in which he says again and again, "*Dai Boshe* - May God provide - that we be saved from this situation.

After the catastrophe with the nuclear reactor in

Chernobyl, USSR, the Moscow newspaper, "Pravda" published for the first time a Christian poem.

There are thousands of cases where unbelievers have prayed in situations of grave danger or on the threshold of death. But how many instances could one find in which a man of prayer, in a moment of sadness or peril, would abjure prayer and become an atheist?

Prayer is greatly valued by those who practice it. In fact, the Bible describes it as a golden vial full of incense.

Tertullian wrote: "Prayer is the one thing that can conquer God...Its only art is to call back the souls of the 'dead' from the very journey into death, to give strength to the weak, to heal the sick, to exorcise the possessed, to open prison cells, to free the innocent from their chains. Prayer cleanses from sin, drives away temptations, stamps out persecution, comforts the fainthearted, gives new strength to the courageous, brings travellers safely home, calms the waves, confounds robbers, feeds the poor, overrules the rich, lifts up the fallen, supports those who are falling, sustains those who stand firm...What more need we say on the duty of prayer? Even the Lord Himself prayed."

Luther called prayer "the mighty empress," adding, "Through prayer we lead what is in order, correct what is erroneous, bear what cannot be changed, conquer all catastrophe and keep all that is good."

The unhappy Catholic Queen Mary Stuart had the right intuition when she said, "I fear Knox's prayers more than an army of ten thousand." Knox was the reformer of Scotland whom she kept in jail.

Let us listen to what the scientist Isaac Newton says about prayer: "I can take my telescope and look millions and millions of miles into space, but I can lay my telescope aside, go into my room, shut the door, and get down on my knees in earnest prayer, and I see more of Heaven and see more of God than I can assisted by all the telescopes and material agencies on earth." Furthermore, he said, "All my discoveries have been made in answer to prayer."

Mental specialists have conceded that of all the measures prescribed to counteract disturbed sleep, depression of the spirit, and disturbances of the mind, the most effective is the simple habit of prayer.

Tennyson adds: "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of...What are men better than sheep or goats that nourish a blind life within their brain if, knowing God, they lift no hands of prayer both for themselves and those whom they call friends?"

Kierkegaard wrote: "The archimedic point outside the world is the closest in which a true man of prayer prays with all sincerity. He has the point of appliance needed for overthrowing the world."

The late Dr. E. Stanley Jones, renowned missionary to India, puts it this way: "In prayer you align yourself to the purpose and power of God and He is able to do things through you that He couldn't do otherwise...for this is an open universe, where some things are left open, contingent upon our doing them. If we do not do them, they will never be done. So God has left certain things open to prayer—things which will never be done

except as we pray.”

A Jew brought many complaints to the rabbi of Kotzk. After quietening him down, the rabbi said, “Don’t worry. Worrying is a sin. Simply pray to God with all you heart and He will pity you.”

The Jew protested, “But I don’t have the time for prayer and would not know how to begin.”

The rabbi looked upon him with compassion and said, “If this is the case, then surely you are right to worry. Everyone who does not pray should worry.”

It is common belief among Christians, that one of the most important pieces of furniture in the house is the family altar. Everything in our lives, they acknowledge, must be done with prayer.

Those who lack the conviction that prayer is helpful, who feel that reason opposes the madness of petitioning God, should nevertheless ask if it is reasonable to refuse a try.

When a physician prescribes a new medicine, they must consider the principle *Primum non nocere* (First, do no harm). What harm would it do even an atheist to try the experiment of prayer and, if he finds it unfruitful, then abandon it, enriched with an experience? The mere experience cannot hurt him, especially since it requires so little effort.

### **Exaggeration in Prayer**

We have to beware of exaggeration.

Prayer, like everything else, has its limits, and it is good to be cognizant of them.

It is true that prayer moves not only individuals but history.

During the days of the Civil War in the United States when the North fought for the abolition of slavery, one of President Lincoln's guests had difficulty sleeping. Hearing muffled sounds coming from the room to which he believed the President had retired, he went to investigate. The door was ajar, and he could see Lincoln kneeling before an open Bible pleading with the Lord: "O God, Thou didst hear Solomon when he cried for wisdom. Hear me and save this nation!"

So prayed the man who abolished slavery.

But let us not draw far-fetched conclusions from such incidents.

Hudson Taylor, the English missionary who opened the inland of China for the Gospel, made it his principle "to move men through God by prayer alone."

Happily he was not faithful to this principle. He did not remain in England to pray, but went to China and preached, organized and published. His actions underscored his prayers.

The mother of John and Charles Wesley, the renowned British eighteenth century evangelists, had nineteen children. Every day she prayed individually with each one. But she also educated them. Prayer alone cannot make a child develop properly.

We find in a Midrash (an old Jewish Commentary on the Bible) this explanation of the verse "Fear not, worm of Jacob" (Isaiah 41:14): "Just as a worm has its power only in its mouth as it bores into the trees, so does

Israel have its power in its mouth. By prayer it overcomes all its enemies.”

This is simply not true. Enemies cannot be overcome by prayer alone.

Jews have been slaughtered not only in this century, when it could be argued that many of them are secularized, but also in the past when they were a praying people. Prayer alone does not prevail.

At a breakfast prayer meeting, President Reagan equated the power of prayer with megatonnage, a measurement usually applied to the power of nuclear weapons.

Such words are very dangerous. The implication is staggering. Since the Communists do not pray, by implication, the godless would be powerless against us, which is simply not the case.

Let us keep in all things a sense of balance. Let us believe in the effectiveness of prayer, while recognizing that we have to act ourselves because not everything can be accomplished by prayer alone. We have to beware of exaggeration.

Sholem Aleichem tells about a poor man who always saw the rich eating tortes and insisted that his wife make one for him. In vain she pleaded that she did not have the wherewithal to make one. In the end, she made a dough of old, mouldy bread, mixed it with onions and garlic, and let it burn in the oven until it became black like a chocolate torte. When her husband tasted it, he exclaimed, “What a terrible taste the rich have to eat this disgusting thing!”

Let us not get our notion of prayer from the many wrong practices of the world.

### **Looking to God**

How can one pray correctly?

Prayer does not begin with speaking to God, but with looking at Him.

God has promised that His eyes will be open to prayer. (II Chronicles 7:15) Why then do we close ours when praying? Perhaps we should first look at His face to see how He feels about us and then seek to win Him.

Christ, the Bridegroom, says to the believing soul, "You have ravished my heart with *one look* of your eyes." (Song of Solomon 4:9)

Micah writes, "I will *look* to the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me." (Micah 7:7)

A wise girl who desires to obtain something from her lover does not begin by speaking, but by washing, fixing her hair, adorning herself tastefully, and perhaps using his favorite perfume. Then she charms him with her looks. So we have to learn to look with faith, trust and love.

A Romanian underground preacher began a letter by quoting a well-known verse from the Psalms (121:1): "I will lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence comes my help." Then he continued:

"A young boy was asked by the captain of a ship, 'Can you climb the mast?' He replied, 'I can.' He had climbed many a tree in his youth. The captain then

ordered him to climb up the mast and fix one of the sails. But the ship tossed to and fro, and the boy becoming dizzy, felt he would fall. The captain watching from below shouted, 'Just look up! Don't look down, look up!'

"Only by doing so was the boy saved from falling. He would have drowned if he had not looked up. The same advice is given to firefighters when they climb high ladders.

"I shout the same thing to everyone tossed by the tempests of the world: 'Look up! look up!' Prayer life starts with forming this habit. Don't say words quickly but exercise yourself in looking up to God, from whom comes our help. To look down means to perish.

"The Lord Jesus tells His disciples that the condition of the world when it approaches its end will be very bad, and He recommends, 'When these things begin to happen, look up.' (Luke 21:28) Look up! Otherwise you will drown in the waves of this world.

"Lift your eyes to the hills from whence your help comes. To look down discourages; to look up strengthens and comforts.

"Don't look to your own worth or incapacity. Let us not look to men for help. Jeremiah says, 'Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength.' (17:5)

"Prayer starts with lifting your eyes towards the hills of God. Which hills are meant?

"There is Sinai, where we can learn the commandments of God: not to have other gods besides the God

of Israel; not to bow before graven images; not to take God's name in vain; to keep the Sabbath; to honor parents; not to kill; not to whore; not to lie; not to steal; not to covet what is someone else's.

"There is the hill on which Jesus told us which categories of men are blessed: the poor who are so also in spirit, the mourning, the meek, the hungry after righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peace-makers, the persecuted for righteousness' sake.

"There is Golgotha, where we have crucified Jesus, but where He died forgiving us.

"There is the Mount of Olives, from which He ascended to heaven to prepare us a place.

"Prayer begins with learning to look up. Prayer starts with praying to pray rightly."

### **Short Prayer**

When we asked how to pray, St. Macarius said, "It is necessary to speak much. Stretch your arms and say, 'Lord, pity me how you will and know.' When tempted, say, 'God, help me!' He knows what we need and gives grace."

What can you lose by doing this, in less than one minute a day?

In a hotel, a man asked a servant girl if she ever prayed.

She answered, "With so much work to do, I don't have time."

The lodger said, "I will teach you a short prayer for which everyone has time. Say, 'God, help me.' "

She promised to say this prayer every morning and evening.

Years later, the man returned to the hotel and discovered that the servant girl had been converted and was working in a pastor's home.

She told him how, in the beginning, she said the prayer mechanically. But with time she wondered, "Why do I need help? Am I not good and happy?" She discovered that she was not and in the process found Jesus as her friend and helper.

When the Orthodox pray, they repeat endlessly two brief words, *Kyrie Eleison*-- "Lord, have mercy." Awakening in the morning, they have to say these words twelve times.

"Lord, have mercy" is believed to have been the first prayer ever uttered by human beings, the prayer of Adam and Eve after they had sinned.

To say simply "Lord, have mercy" is a very good prayer, even if you ask for grace for only a very down-to-earth need.

St. Therese of Avila, abbess of a Spanish convent, wrote, "I must laugh and weep at the same time when I see what problems men bring to us that we should pray for. They expect us to pray also for income and money. I believe God will never listen to me for such things.

"The world is in flames. Christ is sentenced afresh. And should we spend our time with demands for things that would make men depart from God? No, now we have no time to bargain with God about such trivial things."

Such words might befit a nun, but Christians in the real world have to pray for such things as income.

St. Matthew writes (9:18) about a ruler who came to Jesus "and worshipped Him, saying, 'My daughter has just died, but come and lay Your hand on her and she will live.' "

To tell Jesus simply what you need, without one word more, is valid worship.

Soren Kierkegaard wrote, "God loves just one thing: to give the one who asks most is the most welcome."

Will Jesus Himself not have prayed for His personal needs?

Two blind men said to Him, "Son of David, have mercy on us."

Jesus knew they had not meant to ask for salvation but for healing.

But without rebuking them, He opened their eyes. His attitude was different from Therese of Avila's. It confounds even the best of Christians, who might have extracted from the blind men a promise to become believers and use their sight well.

The most revered Old Testament books, the Psalms and the prophets, repeatedly use the words "Have mercy." They form a very good prayer however they are used. But they are most efficacious if uttered as if one were pleading with a judge who could pronounce a death sentence or a physician who could heal.

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The whole of mankind is in danger of nuclear destruction. No prayer is more urgently needed than "Lord, have mercy!"

In a very old Russian manuscript by an unknown author appears the following story:

Someone asked Father Serghei, "How should we pray?"

He replied, "Pray mentally and always look into the depths of your heart and say, 'Lord, have mercy on me.' And pray like this when you stand or sit or when you lie down, with mind and heart closed for everything else, restraining the breathing as much as you can and not breathing much.

"First, you will find in yourself great darkness and hardness, and you will realize some obstacle, as a leaden wall between you and God.

"But don't despair: pray with more fervor and the leaden wall will fall. Then you will see in your soul unspeakable light. Then the words cease and the prayer has stopped and the sighs and kneelings are demands from the heart. Then deep silence will reign. Then man does not know any more if he is in the body or out of it.

"This is intelligent prayer."

When it is hard to pray, pray the hardest.

Another good prayer is to say simply "Hallelujah" (The Hebrew for "Praise the Lord!").

When it passed to the Greek from the Hebrews, it was given a new sense. It was well known that *Jah* was a name of God, but *Allelus*, means in Greek "one another." The expression was thus interpreted, "Be like

God to each other."

A dart-prayer widely used in the Eastern Orthodox world is the so-called "Prayer of the heart" or "the Jesus prayer," which consists of the words "Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." The accent is on the last word, "sinner." Its purpose is to remember God continually.

It is supposed to be the first prayer when one awakes. It is also used when one is tormented by sinful fantasies. The lips are sanctified by pronouncing the name of Jesus, which repels the attacks of the devil. Christians who cultivate this practice also go to sleep breathing this prayer: "Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Obviously, the power of such a prayer consists not in the articulation of mere sounds. *Jesus* is the only name that saves (Acts 4:12), but it can be used profanely. Only when the heart speaks through the lips with faith, hope and love for Him as Lord and Savior can prayer have power. Otherwise, it is not useful to say "Jesus," the name that chases devils.

St. John Chrysostom said, "Seek from the Lord mercy with humble heart and pray from morning to evening, 'Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' And accustom your mind to this work until death, because this work needs much effort. The gate is narrow and the road narrow which leads to heaven, and only those who make an effort enter into it.

"Never abandon and never interrupt this prayer, even when you eat, when you drink. Whatever else you

do, say, 'Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' Thus, keeping always in mind the name of the Lord Jesus, your heart will become one with the Lord Jesus and the Lord with your heart."

Short prayers can be very good. I heard this prayer from a new convert: "Dear God, you have no idea how happy you have made me." Another from a Russian lieutenant, who had been educated as an atheist, when he heard the Gospel for the first time: "God, you are really a good chap. If you had been me and I you, I would not have forgiven you so many sins. But you are a fine guy and I love you."

There exist other old traditions about very efficient short prayers. It is said that Moses overheard a shepherd boy saying, "God, if you had sheep, I would pasture them without charge." Moses chided the child: "This prayer is not reverential." So he taught him a solemn prayer. But God reproached Moses: "You should have allowed the boy to go on as he did. I like his prayer."

A legend tells about three Christians who lived alone on an isolated island. Every evening they gathered together and said, "You in heaven are three: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. We on the island are also three: John, George, and Stephen. You Three, bless us three. Amen." That was all.

One day a ship stopped for a while at the island. A travelling bishop who chanced to hear this prayer corrected the men and taught them to pray according to the prayerbook. Then the ship left.

In the evening, the three could not remember what

they had been taught by the bishop. Convinced that their own prayer was not good, they ran on water after the ship and shouted to the bishop, "Eminence, please tell us again the prayers from the book."

The bishop, seeing that the waters upheld them, whereas it took a ship to uphold him, a sinner, shouted back to them, "Go and pray as you always do. Your prayer is better than mine."

Other religions also use simple prayers. The Hindu holy books report a prayer to the god Indra: "If I were like you, O Indra, dispenser of riches, none of those who sing your glory would be without cows."

Recently I dreamt that a sad woman came to ask me for something. I was in a great hurry to catch a train and told her to say in short words what she needed. She could not, and remained without help.

Short, practical prayers, like that of Moses for Miriam, "Heal her, O God" (Numbers 12:13) are recommended. God appreciates not being wearied.

Mary Skobtseva was a Russian nun detained in a Nazi extermination camp for the crime of having helped Jews and others wanted by the Gestapo to escape.

On a Good Friday, hundreds of women had to stand at attention. The Nazi Officers passed through the ranks and picked out at random those who would be burned that day. Among others, they chose a Jewish Communist woman, who begged for mercy, pleading that she had a small child. But the Nazis knew no mercy.

Mary Skobtseva felt the impulse to step forward and offer her life for that of the woman. A voice might have

whispered to her, "What? Sacrifice your life for a Communist? They are as bad as the Nazis. If the Communists were victorious over Hitler, they would exhibit the same ferocity."

But she heard another inner voice: "It is Good Friday, the day on which Jesus died for men, both good and bad, for Communist, for Nazis, and for those who oppose them. He made no distinction. He just loved."

She stepped forward and offered her life. Laughing, the Nazis accepted. "The turn for that Jewish dirt will come some other day," they sneered.

After liberation, when the Nazi officers were arrested by the Allies, they told the story of Skobtseva. While being led to the furnace, she said to them, "In our Bible it is written that when God brought His people out of slavery, He walked before them in a column of fire. I desire that my burning body should be a column of fire showing you the way to God."

She died in the oven. The Communist woman was converted and began to pray. She had never been to a church. Her constant prayer was, "God, made me like Mary Skobtseva." Christians chided her: "This prayer is not good. We pray, 'God, make us Christ-like.' We don't wish to become like another human being, even Skobtseva."

The Communist did not understand. She asked, "What is the difference between saying 'Make me like Skobtseva' and 'Make me Christ-like'? Would Christ have done any more for me that day than Skobtseva?"

"God, make me like the greatest saint I know" is

surely another good short prayer.

A Romanian child who heard for the first time about the Book of Life in which are inscribed the names of those who will enter paradise prayed, "Please inscribe my name. It is Radu."

What counts most in prayer is not what one says or how much—important as these may be. The decisive element in prayer is the nature of the person who prays. If he is a beloved disciple, he will easily prevail.

Esau was a reprobate and obtained nothing, though praying with many tears. (Hebrews 12:17) Jacob, by contrast, prevailed with God because he clung to Him in faith.

\* \* \*

Don't wait to be something other than a sinner before you start to pray. You can do so in the bed where you have just committed adultery, or near the corpse of the man you have just killed.

Jesus told a parable about a prodigal son who returned to his rich father, whom he had forsaken willfully, from the pigpen to which he had descended after wasting his inheritance.

An artist who wanted to paint the scene of his encounter with the Father hired as a model a vagrant in rags. The next day, after receiving some money as an advance, he came to the studio with a haircut and in decent clothes. He no longer had value as a model.

Grace is only for sinners. Come to Jesus as a sinner just as you are.

There is such a thing as conversational and even long prayer.

Leslie Weatherhead tells the story of a young pastor called to the deathbed of an aged Christian. When the pastor went to sit down in an armchair near the bed, the sick man exclaimed, "No, no! Please take another chair." The pastor did so, heard the confession of the dying man, and gave him words of comfort.

The sick man rallied a bit after this and said to the pastor, "You probably wondered why I did not allow you to sit on this chair, though it was nearest to my head and the most convenient place. I will tell you the story behind it.

"Forty years ago, when I as young as you are now, I was an infidel. One day, your predecessor, Pastor X, stopped me on the street and asked me if I ever prayed. I replied, 'Never. I don't have anyone to pray to. If I cry aloud, even the tenant of the apartment above me does not hear me. How then will a distant God hear—supposing He exists?'

The pastor replied, 'You do right not to pray. But as you are young and experiment with many things, I would propose a further experiment. In the morning, when well rested, sit in a comfortable armchair, put another armchair before you, and imagine that Jesus is sitting in it, as He sat in homes in Nazareth and Bethany. You know more or less the character of Jesus from the Bible, or, if you have not read it, from general culture. Every one of us can evoke an absent or an imaginary person.

“Suppose Jesus was in this chair, what would you tell Him? Don’t use ‘religious’ phrases. None of His interlocutors during His earthly life said to Him, ‘Praised be your name, now and for evermore.’ Tell Him your love, if you have any. Tell Him your doubts about Him. If you are angry at Him, tell Him so. Laugh if you are sure He is just a product of your fantasy. If you believe He exists eternally, ask Him how He fares or if you can be any use to Him. Tell Him you are not interested in Him, if this is how you feel....”

(C. S. Lewis said in *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*: “It is no use to ask God with facetious earnestness for A when our whole mind is in reality filled with the desire for B. We must say before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us.”)

“...You have tried so many things. Try this too. In the worst case it will be one of the many funny amusements you have had. Do so for a few days and you will see what happens.’

“Being young, I said I would engage in this experiment. The next morning I imagined Jesus present in this armchair and said to Him whatever just passed through my head. For several days I spoke to Jesus in this manner.

“After a few days, I spoke and received replies, I knew then that I was speaking to Jesus present in this armchair. I have spoken to Him daily ever since, for years.”

The pastor was present at the death of this man. His last gesture was to extend his hand to the unseen Friend

in that armchair.

Others might have had less fortuitous experiences. But is it not worth a try to find such a Friend with whom you can talk over your life, even those things which you do not dare to tell anyone else?

Conversational prayer like that with Jesus in the armchair have special value. Such prayer can give us the habit of turning every conversation into a prayer.

One person can pray saying only, "God, help me." Another can converse at length with the unseen Friend he evokes.

Some pray briefly, others for many hours.

A Christian suffered from arthritis so much that she could not sleep during the night. She was asked, "How do you bear it?"

She replied, "I have so many things to talk about with God! I think about the children and pray for them. Then about sick neighbors, then about the mayor of the town, about the government, and when I have finished with all this, the night has passed and the dawn breaks."

I can testify to the same thing. For years I was confined underground to a solitary cell in Communist Romania. I never slept during the night. Its hours were never enough for all the prayers of praise, intercession, and thanksgiving I had to say. Some pray with faith, some start to pray without faith, like the dying man whose story Weatherhead told.

I myself was an atheist in my youth. My first prayer was simply this: "God, I know for sure you don't exist, but if by any chance You do—which I contest—it is not

my duty to believe in You. It is Your duty to reveal Yourself to me. But you don't exist, and these words have been spoken in foolishness, Amen."

This prayer was accepted. God revealed Himself to me.

We live on different levels. Smell does not perceive beauty, nor sight fragrance; neither do our senses or consciousness perceive many of the works of God.

There is something in us that confirms that prayer brings deliverance, though in a manner not perceived by the senses. Therefore people pray, some with perseverance. Others know that if you knock long enough at a door, the devil might open it. Therefore they do not persist, but they have prayed too.

In prayer, as in other matters, we need not understand everything. God has "hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes." (Matthew 11:25)

If one can say only "Lord, have mercy," this prayer is sufficient.

Prayer can be very simple or very complex.

Luther wrote to his barber Peter Beskendorf about what he used to do to initiate his prayer time: I take my little Psalter, flee to my room, or, if it is during the day and there is an occasion to do so, join the people in the church, and begin to repeat to myself the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and if I have time, some sayings of Christ or verses from Paul and the Psalms. This I do in all respect as children do." As a rule, Luther prayed three hours a day.

Someone complained to Rabbi Elieser that a disciple prayed too long. The rabbi replied, "How is this too long when in Deuteronomy 9:25 it is written that Moses prayed forty days and forty nights?"

Another time he received complaints that the disciple's prayer was too short. He replied, "How can a prayer be too short when in Numbers 12:13 we have short prayer of Moses, 'O God, heal her'?"

It is not the length of the prayer that is important, but that the one who prays be attentive.

One time when the Rabbi of Berditchev finished his prayers in the synagogue, he is reported to have said to the congregation, "Welcome!"

They wondered and asked why he did not welcome them at the beginning of the prayer. He answered, "I would rather welcome you at the end, because when you heard me say 'Amen' you came back from far away. In your minds some of you were in the market, some in your businesses, others with your families. It was only at the end of my prayer that you re-entered the synagogue. Therefore I greeted you at the end."

Our minds go astray in personal and in public worship. Let us not prolong prayers unnecessarily but have our minds concentrated on prayer as we concentrate on private discussions with other men. Let us follow our words. Let us also be attentive to replies we receive in our hearts, and God will bless us.

The words of Jesus "The last will be the first" (Matthew 20:16) apply also to prayer. Let others pray quickly if they must; you think well what you will say.

Those who are the last to finish but have meditated well will be the first.

If we are attentive, we can use prayer "darts." Augustine recommends "very short prayers" so that the devotion of the heart aroused with care, which is so necessary to the person in prayer, may not pass away through length and lose its power... Much talking should be far from prayer, but many petitions should not be missing, if the zeal of devotion continues. People talk much, when they argue with superfluous words for what is needed. But we pray much if with a constant and pious movement of the heart we address the One to whom we pray. This thing is better done with sighs than with words, better with weeping than with talking."

Chrysostom wrote, "Many come to God's house and recite thousands of verses of prayer and leave without knowing what they have said. They moved the lips, but the inner hearing remained deaf. You yourself don't hear your prayer; how do you expect God to hear it? You say 'I knelt,' but your spirit roamed far. Your body was in church, but your spirit was outside. Your lips said prayers, but your spirit made the accounts of income, made contracts, planned their conditions, bought houses, fields and thought about meeting friends. The devil is mean. He knows that during prayer we make great progress and therefore he attacks us just at this time. Often we think about nothing, while lying in bed, but as soon as we intend to pray, thousands of thoughts come, that we may not profit from prayer."

St. Demeter of Rostov said, "A prayer without

attention is like a censer without ember and grains of incense, as a lamp without oil, a body without soul. It is an abomination for Christ our Lord, not pleasant. We receive His grace not through speaking words but through thoughts directed towards Him. It is not the sound of our vocal cords that reaches Him, but the groaning of a repentant heart."

Some distraction in prayer almost seems unavoidable, given the human condition, but it should not be allowed to become a serious problem.

St. Bernard had a friend once who told him he never had any distractions. St. Bernard confessed to having trouble with them. The two were out horseback riding when St. Bernard said, "I will give you this horse if you can say the Our Father without distraction. Now, get off your horse and say the Our Father."

His friend got as far as the words "Give us this day our daily bread" when he looked up at St. Bernard and asked, "Can I have the saddle too?"

There are two principal ways of avoiding distractions:

1. Realize the value and importance of your prayer. Rembrandt, when he painted, would not allow himself to be interrupted even by a monarch.

2. Realize before whom you stand.

And officer approached a believer while he was praying and greeted him. The pious person did not answer him.

The officer waited until he finished his prayers and then said, "You fool! Why didn't you return my greet-

ing? Doesn't your Law advise you to guard your life? Were I in the mood I could have cut off your hands and no one would have known the difference."

The pious man answered, "Permit me to explain my actions. If you were standing before a king and your friend came along and greeted you, would you have returned his greeting?"

"No," replied the officer.

"And if you had responded to his greeting, what would they have done to you?" the pious man asked.

"They would have cut off my head," answered the officer.

"Therefore, by your answer can you understand my actions? If you are not allowed to respond when you stand before a mere mortal king, who is here today and gone tomorrow, how much more so when I stand before the greatest king of all, God, the King of kings, who lives eternally? Is it not proper that I should not respond to your greeting when I pray?"

The officer was very pleased by this clever answer, and he escorted the pious man on the road to protect him from any harm.

Therefore, we should learn a lesson and never speak or hold any conversations during our prayers.

3. Identify in prayer with the sufferings of Godhead, of all those for whom you pray. No one can easily be distracted from his own great sorrow. If the sorrows of others have become yours, you will be able to overcome distractions in prayer.

Because attention is so important, beware of exaggeration in prayer.

In the fourth century there were monks called Euchites who refused every kind of work, desiring to dedicate themselves only to prayer.

Old Abba Lukios asked them, "What is your work?"

They replied, "We don't touch any work even with a finger, but we pray without ceasing, as the apostle says." (I Thessalonians 5:17)

Then the elder asked, "Don't you eat?"

They replied, "Yes."

"When you eat, who prays for you?" He also asked, "Don't you sleep?"

"Yes."

"And when you sleep, who prays for you?"

They did not know what to answer. Then he said to them, "Forgive me, but you don't do what you say. I will tell you that I pray unceasingly, though I work with my hands." (*Apophthegmata Patrum*)

We received a touching letter from a young man in Canton, China: "As I listen to the program broadcast by your radio, I begin to know Jesus Christ. I am a believer. But what does it mean to be a believer when men are entirely separated from God, having no church in between? Indeed, I don't know what it is to pray. Perhaps it is that after all things we say, we should be able to add the word *Amen*."

This is the best definition of prayer I have ever heard.

Let us exemplify this:

You come home from your work, tired and irate. Your wife brings you the soup. You bully her "What kind of soup is this? It has no taste. And it is unclean. Here, a hair of yours swim in it. Take it. I am fed up with you." Could you say "Amen" after this?

But if, keeping your smile in spite of bitterness which you have encountered at your job, you thank your wife nicely for the soup. After having tasted, you can say to her, "I see you continue to be madly enamoured. Thinking about me, you forgot to put salt in the soup. But in exchange, what a wonderful surprise. You know I love your hair. So you put a hair even in the soup. I will buy a medallion and keep this hair in it around my neck for ever. And now come, I wish to hug you." This was a good prayer to which you can add "Amen".

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Jesus gave us the model of a prayer, the "Our Father." The ancient church had the custom of reciting the Lord's Prayer thrice daily. He also gave us another model, His high priestly prayer in John 17.

Both prayers contain deep significance and should not be said hurriedly.

The "Our Father" is the strongest prayer. Christians believe Jesus to be God, one with the Father.

In this prayer, God tells only verbatim what they should say to God. So He knows beforehand what they will say, He having dictated the words Himself. So what is the need to say then?

He tells us we should pronounce these words, even

if we think and feel something entirely else.

How many of us if asked by an angel, which are the three things most "desired of you to bring before God," could reply honestly, "Well, the things upmost in my mind are the hallowing of His Name, the coming of His Kingdom and the fulfilling of His will," though this is what we are taught to pray for.

God might need it we should say just these things. Why?

We will surely be able to touch only the fringes of this mystery, but let us try to orientate ourselves as it at least a little bit.

Jesus asked us to say the words of high spirituality of the "Our Father." He is in disagreement with C.S. Lewis' words quoted already once:

"It is no use to ask God with facetious earnestness for A when our whole mind is in reality filled with the desire for B. We must say before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us."

Saying just these words and just in this order, though they don't express our state of mind when we pray, will teach us the right promises.

Repeating this prayer again and again, our thoughts will become orderly and we will get the right state of heart.

When you say the "Our Father," you speak to a Father who is described in the Bible as "wearied." Would it not be a blessed privilege to caress a tired father and to comfort a loving Savior who is crucified afresh again and again through our sins? (Hebrews 6:6)

An hour spent on an "Our Father" is not too much. It can be an hour of joyful communion between two enamored beings, who do nothing more than give each other love. God has done the ultimate for you. Is an hour of communion your maximum for Him?

Rabbi Mordecai of Letchowitz taught that when you say the word "Lord" in prayer and think about adding "...of the World," then you have not spoken. When you say in prayer the word "Lord," your whole heart should be in it. Then you can advance to the next word.

Bishop Theophanes of Vyshensk wrote: "Meditate on every word of your prayer and lead it to your heart. When you say 'Free us from evil,' feel yourself polluted by your sinfulness, then desire and pray for cleanness from God. When you say 'Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who trespass against us,' forgive everyone else with all your heart, then ask forgiveness for yourself. When you say 'Thy will be done,' then entrust your fate fully to God and express your readiness to accept willingly whatever God decides to send you."

The Lord's prayer begins with the words "Our Father." In Hebrew, the language Jesus spoke, it is only one word, *Avinu*.

This prayer will surely be very efficient, because when you say it, the Father recognizes the words of His Son, who prayed like this.

Jesus said, "Whatever you ask the Father in My name, He will give you." (John 16:23) You fulfill this condition when you recite with faith the "Our Father." He recognizes in your prayer the words of Jesus.

It is good to use imagination in prayer. When reciting the Lord's prayer, evoke the presence of Jesus. Imagine He recites it with you. (The same way we can imagine angels saying together with us "Holy, holy, holy the Lord Almighty" and pastors would do good to evoke in their mind the presence of Jesus in a Holy Communion service. He saying together with the pastor "Take and eat, this is my body" and "Take and drink, this is my blood".)

Yea more, the Anglican liturgy says we pray together with angels, archangels and the whole company of heaven, which means it is best to say in prayer words to which they can subscribe.

Might it not be so that the wording of the 'Our Father' is their daily prayer in which they identify with us and that because of this we have to say it Lord.

It is significant that Jesus said "Our." God is not only Jesus' Father but yours as well. And when you appear before Him, it is best to make room for others whose needs are so much like yours. Jesus' model prayer did not use "I" and "my" because it is meant to be said by a person who has denied the self.

"Our" must be a large "our." It should not be "God, bless me, my wife, my son John, his wife, us four, no more. Amen."

Don't ask only for yourself. Every self is only a fraction which cannot be happy outside a happy whole.

This is not to deny that there is a place for personal prayer limited to one's own needs. In Gethsemane, Jesus prayed that the bitter cup might pass from Him. He

prayed only for Himself. On the cross He did not pray for the thieves who were also treated inhumanely. Nor did He pray—as far as we know—that His mother be spared this sorrow. It is proper to pray for oneself—but not exclusively.

Prayer leads ultimately to forgetting about self. Most of Jesus' recorded prayers were for others.

The first prayer recorded in the Bible is Abraham's prayer for the worst of men, the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Does prayer for other people, for their physical healing, their success in life, or their conversion work?

Be assured that every prayer has an influence upon the persons for whom you pray, as well as those who depend on them.

A prayer for another is like a healing medicine, which, if properly administered, will certainly do some good. There may be hindrances to the healing of the sick, such as an advanced condition, poor nutritional habits, negative attitudes toward recovery, etc. But on balance it is better to give than withhold the medicine.

When we pray, we must be confident that something will happen at the other end. When we make a telephone call, somewhere at a distance there is a ring, and there is an interest, and there is a response. To Daniel, the prophet who had prayed for three weeks, an angel says, "From the first day that you set your heart to understand, and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard." (Daniel 10:12)

The devil can delay or interfere with the blessing, but

he cannot prevent all messages from getting through.

George Mueller, renowned prayer warrior of the last century, was asked, "Is there anything for which you prayed that you have not received?"

He answered, "I have prayed for the conversion of three friends, for one 32 years, 7 months and 15 days, for the other 23 years, 4 months and 7 days, and for the third 16 years, 8 months and 3 days. I am convinced that my prayers will be fulfilled. If I did not have this conviction I would consider prayer to be a waste of time."

These last words were said by Mueller when he was on his deathbed. A preacher, Dr. Pearson, told this story in a sermon after he had passed away. Later he found out that two of the friends had been converted. The same story was told by another preacher named Dalman. Mueller's third friend "happened" to be at that service, and he was converted.

One might liken our prayers to treasures kept in a safe in heaven. Since we have an eternal life before us, there is the possibility that some our prayers will find fulfillment there. Sometimes God surprises us. Instead of answering prayers as presented, He goes beyond the requests of the petitioner and gives "good measure, pressed down and running over." (Luke 6:38)

In Nazi times, a German carpenter living in the Romanian village of Noua prayed that God would be gracious and allow him to bring one Jew to Christ. But God was not satisfied to fulfill his desire explicitly. He gave him two Jews, my wife and me. We, in turn, won

other Jews for Christ, many of whom emigrated to Israel. Today there are Hebrew-Christian congregations in Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Haifa that have as their spiritual father a carpenter who prayed for only one Jew.

Eventually our family came to the West, where the International Christian Mission to the Communist World was formed. Its first founder is likewise that old carpenter who had modestly asked for only one single Jew.

A Christian in Sri-Lanka—Nick King—sent me the following poem, entitled “Extra Prayer”:

When the world falls down around you  
And a prayer will see you through,  
Say an extra prayer for someone  
Who may need it more than you.

For who knows what hearts are breaking  
In the silence of the night?  
Just that extra prayer you whisper  
May help someone see the light!

Every time you help a stranger  
With an extra prayers, or two,  
You are building secret blessings  
That will all come back to you!

While praying for others, encourage them to pray for themselves, even if they are unaccustomed to such an exercise. Remind them that a strange voice is most quickly heard.

Jesus enjoined us to pray not only for our friends but also for our persecutors, else how will they find Christ? They are part of our legitimate concern. However if they do not repent, our prayers will come upon them as curses, since they continue to despise the blood of Jesus.

There is such a thing as justified prayer *against* some people, who must be expelled from our sphere like cancerous organs excised from the body.

I was in jail with a very primitive man who began every morning swearing at the Communists, after which he would say the "Our Father." I chided him: "Why do you do this?" He replied, "Because I fear God will punish all those who do not swear at the Communists." I stopped reproving him.

Cursing and swearing surely do not fall under the rubric of civilized Christian behavior. But we can express to God in prayer all our revulsion against the tyrants who torture innocents.

The prophet Elisha prayed that God would strike the Syrians with blindness, which He did. (II Kings 6:18)

Luther prayed and called others to prayer against the Turks. In fact, he wrote one tract on this subject alone, enjoining Christians to fast, kneel, bow, and prostrate themselves in this prayer. He saw in the Turk God's wrath, which he thus hoped to avert.

The church still recites psalms full with imprecation against the enemies of God.

Jesus taught us to pray to "*our* Father," not *my* Father." A good spiritual exercise would be to try for a whole day not to say "I" or "my" or "mine." Our almost

total reliance on these pronouns might shock us.

The apostles "continued with one accord in prayer and supplication." (Acts 1:14) On the occasion, awaiting Pentecost, they did not pray separately but in one accord "with Mary, the mother of Jesus." How could Jesus refuse His mother's prayer?

God is "Our Father." We are to think of Him as a true father. We can approach Him with full confidence that He loves us intimately, as individuals.

When we say "Our Father," we must eliminate from our thinking all unworthy notions about God: that He is cruel, harsh, judgmental, unloving, as He appears in many popular religious conceptions.

Superficially, the Bible often appears to describe Him like this. But cruelty and deceitfulness are not to be considered attributes of God.

He is called in the Hebrew *nose avon*, usually translated "who forgives sin." This translation is correct, except that the word *nose* also has another sense, "who bears." He forgives sins by bearing them, by taking them upon Himself.

The cruel, ugly deeds of men are taken by God upon Himself. Therefore, He speaks about them as if they were ordered or committed by Him.

When we say "Our Father," we know that He is upright as well as loving.

Jesus encourages us to call God "Father," just as a natural son might encourage an adoptive child to feel comfortable saying "father." Jesus Himself calls us "brothers," "children of God."

With the lips it is possible for anyone to call God "Father," even if he is "of his father the devil." But "only those whose actions do not proclaim another Lord serve Him." (Origen) No one is entitled to call Him "Father" unless he accepts Him as Lord of his life.

We may have no difficulty speaking reverently to God as "Our Father." But He might ask, "Do you speak with reverence and respect to your earthly father?"

John the Evangelist writes, "He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?" (I John 4:20)

This applies even more to the relationship between child and parent. How can one appeal with love to a heavenly Father if he is not in a good relationship with his earthly parents?

The only case in which the loving Jesus quoted an Old Testament commandment endorsing the death sentence was for bad behavior toward parents: "He who curses father and mother, let him be put to death." (Mark 7:10)

Before saying the "Our Father," one must first make peace with his earthly parents.

We are to say "Our Father," not "Our Daddy." God is not a father who spoils his children. He has ordained us for large tasks. We are called to be priests and kings, rulers of cities and judges in another existence. For these roles we need training. Jesus, appointed to be our High Priest, was first called to be a Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief.

If by saying "Our Father" we proclaim ourselves as

His obedient children, we can be sure He will entrust us with a cross.

We should say "Our Father" with the consciousness of Abraham: "I who am but dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord." (Genesis 18:27)

When Jesus was on earth, He said repeatedly, "I am." God also likes to hear "You are." Peter was commended for saying to Jesus, "You are the Son of the living God." Let us spend less time in prayer saying "I" and more saying "You are." Let us with confidence say, "You are my beloved Father."

The Talmud (Berakoth treatise) tells about a Jew who prayed with grandiose eloquence: "God of our fathers, Great, Almighty, Terrible, Splendid, Powerful, All-Inspiring, and Worshipful."

Rabbi Chanina asked him, "Have you finished now with so much praise to God? Why do you need these many words? It is as if a king had a treasure of millions of gold coins and men praised him for his many silver coins. This would be an insult to the king."

To say "Our Father" is enough. Start to say the Lord's Prayer with the belief that God exists and that He rewards those who seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)

St John of Kronstadt wrote: "When I pray, I believe with intensity that God is everything and fills everything and that He is at my right hand, that I am in His image, that He is full of compassion and its source, and that He gave me the authority to pray."

A person once stood in front of an electric plant and said, "What a waste of money and energy! I can do with

far less. I get electricity from a plug."

One fish said to another, "How foolish are those men on the beach. I overheard them saying that they see an ocean. That's religious cant. We have lived in this water for generations, and it's a small place. None of us know anything about an ocean, which they say is thousands of miles wide. Humans invent things!"

We smile and say he had the perspective of a shore fish. But whoever gets a tan on the beach and attributes it to the sun, whoever hears a lark and says there are birds in the area, whoever sees the leaves trembling on the branches and knows there is a breeze, yet lives in God's world and denies He exists, is thinking no more clearly than that poor fish.

God does exist, and we may speak to Him in prayer. Having said all this, we have to admit that in uttering "Our Father" we are using a conventional term.

\* \* \*

Since the early centuries, the church has had images of God that were revered. Then there arose so-called iconoclasts—the word means "overthrowers of images"—who believed such images in churches were unlawful, forbidden by God in the Ten Commandments.

But the Bible itself contains a rich imagery of God. He is called "the Ancient of Days," "a Man of war," "King," "love," "revenge," "rock," "fortress," "shield," "lamp," "tower," etc.

Generally, what we call "truths," not only in religion

but even in natural sciences, are comparisons, similitudes, probabilities, likelihoods, approximations.

Quarks, smallest known particles in the physical world, have been named "beauty," "truth," "charm" by today's scientists. You say "charm" and get an infinitesimal hint of what the world is about. Scientists also consciously use misnomers like "atom," which means in Greek "the indivisible," for what they regularly split in nuclear reactors.

Jesus said again and again, "The Kingdom of God is like" this and that. He says those who oppose Him are "like children," suggesting certain comparable features.

In this sense God is called a "Father." This is one of the many images or approximations of what God is like.

Call Him "Father," but be careful about applying to Him all the connotations of the word "Father." In our experience there are bad, even criminal fathers. And even the best earthly fathers make mistakes.

"Father" applied to God is therefore only a comparison. Every comparison limps.

A blind man asked, "What is the color of milk?"

"It is white as paper," was the reply.

"Then, does it mean it is also smooth to the touch like paper?"

"No, it is white like flour."

"Is it also soft like flour?"

"No, it is like a white rabbit."

"Then it has hair like the skin of rabbits."

"No, it is white as snow."

"Then it must be very cold."

This is the danger of all comparisons.

Believe in God as a Father, while recognizing that the appellation is not exhaustive. Moslems reject the concept of God as Father. For them he is only a Master. Some Christians would like to have Him only as a Father, which again is impossible. He must be Father and Master and many other things besides.

He gives to Himself the name "I AM WHO I AM." (Exodus 3:14) He is not what we imagine or desire Him to be. Hindus describe Him as "No, no." The Kabbala calls him "Ein" (Nothing) in the sense that He is nothing of what we consider Him to be.

He is unintelligible, imperishable, unattached. He cannot suffer in the way we conceive suffering, nor err, nor be confined to our thought-forms.

Yagnavalkya says in *Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad*: "He who has found Him is no more burned by evil; he burns all evil. He is free from evil, from spots, from doubt. He becomes one spirit with Him."

It is good to say "Our Father" knowing that such an image brings Him near to our hearts but that He is beyond any image, even that of all the unimaginable being.

If ants could think, they might conceive of God as the largest ant, perhaps with two stings, whereas they have only one. Elephants would conceive of Him as an elephant. As a matter of fact, Hindus worship Him in the shape of an elephant—the god Ganesh.

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## **To Whom Can We Pray?**

While the "Our Father" teaches us to address our prayers to the Father in heaven, is it only to Him that prayers should be addressed? The first generation of Christians already prayed to Jesus as well. St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, said at death, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." The Bible ends with a prayer addressed to the Savior, "Come, Lord Jesus." (Revelation 22:20)

It is of great practical value to enter into communion with the Lord Jesus through prayer.

A man arrived at the station just when a commuter train was scheduled to leave. Breathlessly, he asked the man at the gate, "Can I still catch the train?" He was pointed to a bearded man in the crowd and told, "Just follow him."

He did so and said to the one with the beard, "According to my watch the train must have left already. Now I will have to wait for another hour."

"Don't worry," was the smiling rejoinder. "Just follow me and you will catch the train."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I am the engineer."

Jesus is the One who has built the mansions in heaven for believers.

He is the wonderful Counselor for the journey there. He is the Captain of our salvation.

Prayer to Jesus is an exercise in following Him to a sure destiny in paradise.

But there must be real fellowship with Jesus. In

Revelation, the Lord is described as being not in the midst of the church of Laodicea, but standing at the door knocking for entrance. His bride is characterized as being lukewarm and self-deceived. Under such conditions, prayers to Jesus are meaningless.

Should we also pray to other beings, to Mary or other saints?

The contradiction in this regard might have arisen out of semantic confusion. The word "to pray" has many connotations.

We can say to someone, "Do this for me, I pray," without attributing divine powers to him. The French also use the expression "*Je vous prie*" (I pray to you) frequently for quite simple demands addressed to fellow-men. The same is true of other languages.

So praying to a saint need not mean giving him adoration due only to God. We consider him someone with whom we can communicate, and we tell him our thoughts and desires. In this sense the rich man in hell, in a parable of Jesus, prays to Abraham.

But the saints have long since been dead. Can we speak to them notwithstanding?

Joshua (24:27) spoke about a stone as if it heard the words of the Lord. A man of God spoke to an altar. (I Kings 13:2) The bride in Solomon's Song (4:16) speaks with winds. Joel spoke to the beasts of the field. (Joel 2:22) Other prophets spoke to mountains and similar inanimate objects. Jesus promised that mountains would move and trees be uprooted if we told them to do so.

Francis of Assisi spoke to the sun and the birds,

Anthony of Padua to fish. How often we hear the expression "the damned thing" or "that blessed thing." This belongs to human speech and thought.

Ezekiel speaks to kings and nations far away to which he had no physical access. (Ezekiel 28:2; 31:2). There was no radio or TV at that time. It must have been a discussion in imagination with persons and multitudes at a great distance. Reason mocks such practices, but it is not reasonable always to listen to reason.

Can we also speak to dead persons? The prophet Ezekiel spoke to dead bones. Again this might be a figure of speech, a type of rhetoric. Even so, why can't I also use it; why can't I express my thoughts in the form of a conversation with someone who has passed away?

Jesus spoke on Mount Tabor with Moses, who had died over a thousand years earlier. It is a common Jewish custom to go to tombs of parents or renowned rabbis to ask for their prayers.

Protestants preferred to have their tongues pierced with a hot iron than say a "Hail Mary." Catholics were tortured by Protestants for refusing to give up the practice.

Even now, millions upon millions of Catholic Christians find it natural to speak with Mary, while Protestants reject this practice, though Luther, even after the Reformation, sometimes used to say an *Ave Maria* in the pulpit before preaching. (Luther, *Volksausgabe*, vol.I, p. 445).

He completed his work on the "Magnificat," the Virgin's song, in 1521, four years after pasting his

famous theses on the door of the church. In it, he recommended that Mary not be made an idol, as is the custom with many Catholics, but he finishes the book by asking her to pray for him.

The archangel Gabriel said, "Hail Mary, full of grace." Would he have avoided this greeting if threatened with having his tongue pierced with a hot iron?

The Bible says, "we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses." (Hebrews 12:2) Are we forbidden to feel being surrounded by their gentleness? What are they surrounding us for? The creed speaks about "the communion of the saints." So probably they surround us in order to have communion with us. They are interested in what we think, say and do. They can perceive some of our life, without which communion is not possible. Could they not suggest to us some of their thoughts?

For years the Communists kept me in solitary confinement in a subterranean cell, without either reading or writing material and deprived of the sound of a voice or even a whisper.

At that time I preached, which means I spoke with my congregation far away and with all of Christendom. Some of these discourses were published in my books *Sermons in Solitary Confinement* and *If Prison Walls Could Speak*.

After their publication, I received a letter from a Christian in Canada who told about being sentenced for robbery in his youth. For misbehavior in prison he was put in a solitary cell. There he sought God but could not find Him. Then he prayed, "God, if anywhere in the

world there is another lonely prisoner who knows You, bring me his thoughts." Then he heard an inner voice that led him to repentance.

Later, after reading my books, he found out that those thoughts were among those expressed in my solitary sermons. They had reached him at a distance of thousands of miles. We were both in solitary cells at the same time.

I had also other such letters.

Paul was convinced that his desire to see people saved through Christ had reached the whole world. (Colossians 1:6) There seems to be such a thing as preaching the Word to those beyond our reach. Likewise, longings for truth seem to seek out, through unseen channels, great spiritual centres, as recorded in I Kings 10:24: "And all the earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put in his heart." How else can these scriptures be explained?

If a man's thoughts can influence others without communications, how much more will concentrated prayer, borne by ardent love and concern. However, one must recognize that there are contrary influences at work, too, that might attenuate your influence on other, delay it, or even annihilate it. The soul of every person is a battlefield of contradictory influences, all seeking a response. The devil is constantly at work in his realm to undo the work of God in the heart. Our prayers are God's chosen vehicle for countering Satan's work. We can communicate at distances as space. Telepathy places it, too. Can we communicate also with saints of

old, at distances be true?

To evoke the dead is sinful. But the creed asserts that there can be also a pure communion of saints.

In early 1985, I was in a Catholic church in Zaton, Egypt, where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared. I meditated on her life and felt her nearness. Thoughts occurred to me that I had never had nor read anywhere before.

What girl would willingly become pregnant if she knew she would give birth to a Mongoloid child? Yet Mary accepted her pregnancy knowing before-hand from Jewish prophecies that her Son would be a Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief.

She also knew that He would be a Savior. Savior from what? The Jewish people were oppressed and urgently needed salvation. Imagine telling the Jews in Auschwitz, who knew that they were destined for the gas chambers and ovens, that a Savior would be born to them after nine months, that it would be thirty years before He began His work, and that then He would die, without having helped anyone escape from an extermination camp. The whole story of a Savior would be meaningless.

Mary must have been interested in studying details of the prophecies about her Son. Thus she learned to be above time, in the sphere in which He saves.

The One to whom a throne was promised was born on hay, in a rude stable. She must have thought, "Will so much poverty and suffering not make Him harsh, as it often does?...Will He not be annoyed with my little

concerns, like the lack of wine at a wedding party?...Will His human mind bear the strain of knowing Himself to be the eternal God?"

We do not know how many of His miracles she witnessed. After the resurrection He appeared to many, but apparently not to His mother.

Catholics call her "co-redemptrix," I suppose in the sense that she identified with the sufferings predicted about Jesus even before He was born. She had begun to suffer before Him. In a sense we are also co-redemptors, because we fill up in our flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, (Colossians 1:24) that is, we are human beings who share His redeeming sufferings.

After my experience in Egypt, I found myself in the Reformed Elizabeth Church in Basel, Switzerland. Again my thoughts went to Mary.

In the moral atmosphere of Israel two thousand years ago, for a virgin to be pregnant was like finding a peaceful man holding a blood-stained knife over a corpse, or an honest man with his hand in another's pocket—in other words, like a criminal with no excuse. All this Mary accepted. Therefore she is great. What harm does it do to tell her a few words of praise?

Through the new birth, our souls become virginal again, but like her we seem ridiculous. In her ninth month, the virgin was very obviously an expectant mother, and later she suckled a child looked upon as illegitimate. We are saints who commit obvious sins. But we are really what we are in God's eyes and in the eyes

of those who belongs to Him.

This is what I have to say about “praying” to Mary—which is a misnomer for just talking to her or having communion with her as with a fellow-saint.

The same applies to addressing martyrs in prayer.

St. Jerome, in his *Attack on Vigilantius*, asks. “While the Devil and the demons wander through the wide world, and with only too great speed are everywhere, the martyrs, after shedding their blood, are to be kept out of sight, shut up in a coffin from whence they cannot go forth...”

“If apostles and martyrs, while still in the body, can pray for others, when they ought still to be anxious for themselves, how much more must they do so after they have their crowns and victories and triumphs?”

“A single man, Moses, won pardon from God for six hundred thousand armed men, and Stephen, the follower of the Lord and the first martyr for Christ, entreats pardon for his persecutors, and after they have entered into their life with Christ, should they have less power?”

A man complained to U.S. Department of Agriculture about the dandelions in his garden and asked for advice. The Department counseled him what to do but to no avail. Again and again he pestered them with letters, but no advice helped. Finally he received a letter: “If you can’t get rid of the dandelions, learn to love them.”

Life is the best of books. It teaches Protestants that they cannot persuade Catholics to give up praying to Mary and the saints, and Catholics that they cannot

convince Protestants to pray to human beings.

There remains a solution to the problem: to understand one another, to tolerate one another, to attribute right motives to one another, to love one another.

Jesus says that wheat and tares are to be allowed to grow together. Tares are a nuisance to the grower. To the botanist they are a plant just like wheat, an interesting object of study. They may not provide nourishment for humans, but may be a dainty for other creatures. A religious practice distasteful to me can be matter-of-course for someone else.

### **Hallowed be Thy Name**

In the Lord's Prayer, the first petition is "Hallowed be Thy Name."

Is our first concern that the Name of God be hallowed?

Man is a creature who passes through numberless sorrows. It is a tremendous achievement for him to make an abstraction of them and, when speaking to Him who is best able to help, to say with sincerity, "My first petition is that Your Name be sanctified."

I am reminded of a barefoot beggar I knew in Romania who knelt and prayed for his king, Charles II. living in a palace. I also think of another Romanian, sentenced to 25 years in jail, who once accompanied me as a prisoner from one jail to another. We had been herded together with other prisoners into a wagon filled beyond capacity. As we bumped along the road in the hot summer, crammed together like vertical sardines,

without air or water, with heavy chains on our ankles, he inclined his head to me and asked, "Would you please explain to me Einstein's theory of relativity?" Men with whom spiritual problems came first.

Jesus teaches us that our first petition in prayer should be *for* God. This is because we are dealing with a crushed, (Ezekiel 6:9) agitated, (Ezekiel 16:43) despised, (Malachi 1:6) wearied (Isaiah 7:13) God, as I said earlier. He needs our prayers, like every being in sorrow.

May His Name to be hallowed.

A child was once heard to say, "Harold be Thy Name." He was too young to know what "hallowed" meant. We smile as adults at his childish ignorance, but sorrily many adults do not know either.

God complains, "My Name is blasphemed continually every day." (Isaiah 52:5) With this in mind, we ask Him to ameliorate the situation by sanctifying His name (this is what the old English expression "hallowed" means); we desire that He do something for His own prestige.

Since His name is "Love," let love be glorified in this world.

When Goebbels, Hitler's propagandist minister, was reproached because the Nazis were cruel to the Jews, who are also living beings, he replied, "So are bedbugs. Should we also be nice to them?" Echoing him, on November 7, 1983, a man of the KGB, the Soviet Secret Police, boasted on TV, "The killing of a man is like killing a bedbug on the wall—it is unpleasant."

Such a mentality blasphemes God's name—Love. We pray, "Hallowed by Thy Name." The ecumenical translation explains it this way: "Cause Yourself to be acknowledged as God."

St. Augustine long ago asked the question: "Is it for you that you pray thus? Is it not rather *for* God?"

With such motivation, you will not be satisfied only to express this desire in prayer, but will contribute to its fulfillment by heeding Jesus' advice: "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and *glorify your Father in heaven.*" (Matthew 5:16) The Father is glorified in my life when I bear much fruit, and this is possible only if Christ abides in me and I in Him. (John 15:4,8)

\* \* \*

To say "Hallowed be Your Name" also means to acquiesce to everything God does to this end.

Nehemiah (9:10) says to God, "You showed signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his servants, and against all the people of his land. For you knew that they acted proudly against them. *So You made a name for Yourself...*"

Usually, when God wishes to sanctify His name by punishing the wicked, His children intercede on behalf of the wicked, as did Abraham for Sodom and Gomorrah. What then should God do? Surely we can do nothing better than leave it to Him to decide how best to achieve His goal, saying only, "Thy Will be done."

\* \* \*

Since prayer is not meant to be a monologue, when we say "Hallowed be Your Name" God could reply, "What about your own? Have you sanctified it? Is your primary objective to become a saint?"

Obviously, the name of God should always appear holy. We are to sanctify the Lord of hosts. (Isaiah 8:13) Our prayer is legitimate. But we are also told, "You shall be holy." (Leviticus 19:2) We are called to be saints, sanctified in Christ Jesus. (I Corinthians 1:2)

Therefore we should say to God, "Since I am Your child, I am also Your name-bearer. If You do not provide for me, Your name will be put to shame." And then fight against idolatry, heresy, against those who preach as God's will the deceit of the devil, against false teachings in the name of God. Fight against persecution and for the well-being and salvation of souls who perish because of the many lies and the much terror of their persecutors.

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### **Thy Kingdom Come**

We pray "Thy kingdom come." Earthly authorities are ordained of Him and are intended to rule in His spirit, but this happens rarely. Most of those in authority act contrary to God's will. The prayer "Thy kingdom come" is therefore a prayer for the overthrow of tyrannies and all ungodly governments.

When His kingdom comes, *we* will be kings. St. Cyprian of Carthage says rightly, "In saying these words, we ask that we might reign under the sovereignty

of Christ." Long before, Jesus had said, looking towards the future, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." (Matthew 25:34).

The prayer for God's kingdom goes beyond the world of logic. These words contain not sense but depth. Reason tells us that, the kingdom of God is eternal. When did God not reign? When did He begin to reign? His reign has no beginning and will have no end." (St. Augustine)

The prayer "Thy kingdom come" is also a tacit confession that I yield my sovereignty to Him, that God reign in my life.

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And then comes the petition "(May) Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Jesus said. "Ask and you will receive." Our response to this promise should not be a long list of demands, but rather that of every lover: "Please ask of me, and let me give."

With such sentiments, we are already on our way to fulfilling God's will, because it is no secret what His will is. "This is the will of God, your sanctification." (I Thessalonians 4:3) Some specifications follow, some examples about what is understood under sanctification: "...that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one

should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness." (vv.4-7)

Sanctification includes obedience to God's other commandments as well.

When we say to God "Your will be done," the implication first of all is that we do His will during our earthly and heavenly life in all matters that concern us. We should live as if we were in the presence of the most beloved Person, whom we desire to please. Loving Him will mean fulfilling His will spontaneously—whether it means working in the kitchen kissing an old mother, picking flowers for a sick person, speaking to someone about Jesus or doing a boresome work in a factory.

A Russian Christian woman by the name of Liuba Skvortsova wrote from jail: "When the Lord was on earth, He said to the disciples, 'My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me.' (John 4:34) Somehow, I especially observed the words, 'My food is to do His will'—perhaps because here I need more food for the body and understand that if I get nothing in the morning, I will hunger until noon. We need food daily; we take it gladly. For the Lord it was a need to fulfill the will of His Father."

We should do His will even if it means sitting in jail or passing through deep sorrows.

To say "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" means to ask for grace to live the life of angels in this life. St. John Chrysostom, who understood this well, gives the following paraphrase: "O you, our King, grant us to

live like the heavenly beings, so that we may will what You will.”

God is love, His will is love. Augustine said, “Love, and do what you wish.” The wish of the lover is to please the Beloved. Therefore, he fulfills the will of God on earth.

Two monks each planted an apple tree in front of his cell. When the time for apples came, one did not have a single fruit in his tree. Greatly disappointed, he went to his brother and saw that man’s tree with branches weighted down with a harvest of fruit.

Angry by now, he asked the brother, “Do we not serve the same God? Did we not each plant a tree at the same time? Why then this injustice? Why did He give you apples and me not?”

“Perhaps,” replied his brother, “you did not pray for your tree.”

“I did not pray? Every day I told God in prayer what I wanted. Please send rain today. Please stop the rain now. Please give sun. Now there’s been too much sun. Please, God, lower the temperature. And after all this, not even one apple. What did you do?”

The other monk replied, “I am not as zealous as you. I prayed just once when I planted the tree. I said to God, ‘Here is a tree. It is not for me to teach you what to do about it. You know gardening better than I. You created trees in paradise and have taken care of billions of them ever since. Give rain or sun when, how, and as much as you like. Only grant that in due time I may have apples’—which, as you see, I have.”

This is the meaning of "Thy will be done"—or rather the first step in that direction, because the monk in question still willed something: to have apples in due season. We can go even further.

Meister Eckhardt wrote, "If one wishes nothing for himself, God wishes for him the same things as for Himself. He wishes the fulfillment for you of all the petitions of the Lord's Prayer: that your name might be sanctified, that your kingdom come, that your will be done on earth as it is in heaven, and so on. If I deny myself, He wishes for me the same things as for Himself.

"Don't ask for a virtue or eternal life. Don't say about anything 'I will' or 'I will not,' but only 'Thy will be done.' Be poor in spirit and in will. Deny yourself."

Can we say with Jesus, "Thy will, not mine, be done"?

St. Catherine of Genoa writes that when we say the Lord's Prayer, "Your will be done" should be the basis. "Your will be done" in everything—in soul and body, in children, relatives, friends, property, and every other thing that might happen to you, either good or bad.

At an advanced age, Catherine could say, "God, it has been 35 years since I asked nothing from You."

If our main prayer is "Your will be done," it is no longer mere speaking but a state of worship. St. Francis of Sales wrote, "Prayer and mystical theology are one and the same thing."

He who prays "Your will be done" passes from being a servant of God to being a friend, then a child, then a bride; from meditating about a religious subject

to arriving at peace. The soul rests in God and enjoys the supreme Good. Silence reigns, and one experiences heavenly inebriation.

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I have already quoted the words of Kant: "It is an absurd and presumptuous illusion to try to distract God from the plan of His intelligence through the impertinent daring of prayers in order to obtain a momentary advantage."

He only seems to be right.

The Bible teaches that our lives are predestined. (Romans 8:29,30 and Ephesians 1:3-5) The ink on the pen with which all the details of our lives have been written by us in the book of life has long since dried.

We read in Psalm 139:16, "Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

But this does not mean prayer has no sense.

It was a great shock for scientists—even for Einstein, who found it unacceptable to the very end—to discover in the realm of microphysics that the classic explanations do not work. In atomic and subatomic processes contradictory statements can both be true.

For thousands of years this has also been the experience of believers when it comes to spiritual matters.

It would seem that all prayer is intended to avert God's predestination or to acquire something from God in spite of it.

The former cannot be obtained, the latter is not desirable. If God is the best and wisest, why would I want to change something He has decreed?

But perhaps—as in subatomic physics—something can be predestined and can be altered. Logic says it is impossible, but human logic may not apply to the things of God.

However, it is not the only purpose of prayer to change the will of God. Kant did not really know what it meant to pray “Thy will be done.” Robert Law wrote, “Prayer is not to get the will of man done in heaven, but the will of God done on earth”—an assertion I would qualify: I would say both can happen in prayer.

Prayer can be not only petition but also praise—a form overlooked by Kant.

Prayers that consist mainly of praise but include an incidental demand will have a practical result. But be careful what you demand. Many have prayed earnestly for children—who later broke the hearts of their parents. Some have prayed for a wife, or for a certain position, or for a pleasure, which eventually led to disaster.

There exists no prayer greater than “Thy will be done.”

\* \* \*

One thing God wills is that we plead with Him even when we disagree with Him in major matters.

God told Moses He had decided to wipe out the Jewish people and make of Moses’ descendants another nation for Himself. If Moses had said “Thy will be

done," we would not have had this Bible and our whole sacred history. (Exodus 32:9-14) Instead, he pleaded with God for the rebellious people, and he prevailed. Moses had understood God's will to be that His decree should be overturned through prayer.

According to a Jewish legend, God said to Moses: "We have to divide up our rules: When I am angry, you must be good. And when you are angry, I will be good. It is not right for both of us to be angry with Children of Israel at the same time. They should never see wrath on both of our faces."

There is another amusing legend: Allegedly, when God told Moses He intended to wipe out the Jewish people because they sinned by adoring a golden calf, Moses replied, "I don't understand Your anger. The idea of the golden calf is admirable. You will lead the Jews during the week; then when You rest on Sabbath, the golden calf will take over. Or else you can rule the chosen people, and the golden calf all other nations."

God replied, "Have you gone mad? How can the golden calf play any role? It is nothing!"

Moses countered, "Is it right for a God to get angry at a nation because of something that He Himself calls nothing?"

The Bible tells about another dispute between believers and God.

God had provided a law according to which all inheritance would go only to sons. But a certain Zelophehad died leaving behind only daughters.

These five daughters complained to Moses that this

law of God was not suitable in their case. Moses inquired of the Lord, and God gave an amazing reply: the girls who had challenged Him were right. (Numbers 26:33; 27:1-11)

Under certain circumstances, then, it might be God's will for you not to acquiesce simply to His commands. This possibility exists, too.

A story is told about the renowned Rabbi of Berditchev.

The Jews were gathered in the synagogue on the eve of the great Day of Atonement. Everyone was waiting for the beginning of the prayer, but the rabbi remained silent.

When the elders finally pressed him to begin, he said, "The prayer cannot start unless Matl the tailor comes." Others had not observed the absence of this poor fellow.

Men were sent to call Matl, but he refused to come. "I am angry with God. I have broken off with Him."

This reply was brought back to the rabbi, who said, "Well, if he does not come, there will be no prayer."

Again a deputation went to the tailor. Finally they convinced him to come, at least to speak with the rabbi, who surely had done him no harm even if God had.

The tailor complained to the rabbi: "I worked for a landowner, making him a fur overcoat and a fur cap. Some pieces of fur remained, which I took with me as I left home. When I had gone some distance down the road, I heard the bells of horses from his carriage. He had sent someone after me. I thought to myself, He

must have observed my theft. Woe is me for the bloody whipping I will receive now!" Quickly I hid the fur in the hole of a tree.

"The carriage was really sent after me, but not because of what I had stolen. The landowner had remembered that he wanted me to do some other work for him. Later, after I had finished this, I returned to the tree and discovered the fur was gone.

"Now, this road is not well-travelled. Who would ever have thought to search the holes of trees to see if they contain something hidden? Only God could have made the fur disappear.

"Why has He done this to me? To steal is wrong, I admit. But on His part it is also wrong to keep in poverty a Jew of His who has eight children. Doesn't He understand that I must clothe them?

"So I decided to quit praying."

The rabbi said, "You are right. But this is the Day of Atonement, when we pray for the forgiveness of our sins. Forgive God what He has done to you, and let us ask Him in exchange to forgive us all."

The tailor agreed, and the service in the synagogue could begin.

Our prayer is "Thy will be done." It is sometimes His will that we should agree with Him.

Jewish legends speak about very daring prayers. Supposedly when Abraham prayed to God for the Sodomites, he said, "Lord, You have given an oath that You will not send a flood on earth again. Now You are about to send not a flood of water but a flood of flames.

This is deceit after You have given an oath.”

One of the characteristic features of holiness is to dare before God. There is an old Christian legend about a woman who prayed to the blessed Virgin to save her only son, who was a prisoner. But her son did not return. The woman then went to the statue of the Virgin, took the Child from her arms, and said, “I don’t have my son, so I’ll take yours. You should know how it feels when you don’t have your son. I will keep yours until you give mine back.” According to the story, the prayer was soon answered.

I am reminded of some nuns who had no money for coal or wood during a bitter winter. They took the statue of the Virgin, put it in a cold cellar, and said, “We suffer from cold; you suffer too. Then you will see what it is like.” Miraculously, they received the fuel they desired.

Therese of Avila once said, “God, You behave so badly with believers, it’s no wonder you have so few.”

We are not meant to be yes-sayers and to rubberstamp everything God says and does. Many things are done to test our intellect.

It is reported that when the winter rains were once delayed in Palestine, a personage in the Talmud stepped into a ditch and said, “Lord of the Universe, Thy children have appointed me spokesman to pray for rain, and I will not budge from here until my prayer is heard.”

Though we are encouraged to come boldly before the throne of grace, (Hebrews 4:16) wisdom will tell us it is not good to ask that God change the laws of nature on our behalf. It is wrong to take advantage of the

goodness of God.

Luther once prayed, "Hear my prayer, O Lord. You just hear it. I am an unworthy sinner, but I must have what I demand...Don't provoke us to the extreme. What will You become if we no longer give You honor and our tithes?...We must compel God to come; through harsh and hostile words let us force God to fulfill our prayers...A time will come when God cannot bear our cries any longer and will reply, 'Be it so. Be it as you will.' "

This is a bold—perhaps even presumptuous—prayer. But there are times when we can fulfill God's holy will by being very daring with Him.

The danger of bold prayer is disappointment when it is unanswered. Furthermore, the things against which we pray might prove to have been blessings in disguise.

To talk to God about all your emotions, good and bad, is legitimate, but it is advisable to think before speaking to Him.

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"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

In Hebrew the singular for heaven does not exist. The word is a plural tantum—*shamaim*. (Every Hebrew word ending in *-im* is plural.)

The original text of the prayer starts with "Our Father which art in heavens" plural—*uranois* in Greek. But here the petition is "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" singular.

Not all heavens are havens of rest. Not in all heavens is the will of God fulfilled joyously by loving inhabitants.

There exists a heaven where a fiery red dragon created havoc by drawing a third of the stars thence to earth. (Revelation 12:3,4) As this cannot be done to physical stars, it must refer to angels, sometimes called stars in the Bible. Can the inhabitants of heaven be thrown out? It certainly happened once. Could it happen again?

In this heaven there was a fierce war. (Revelation 12:6) There were conditions that led to war. Could there have been other wars, about which we are not told?

In Job 1 it is recorded that there was a heavenly council to which the devil had access.

Not all heavens are models for us.

But there exists one heaven, the one referred to in the singular. Jesus must have created in Hebrew a word apart for this, because "heaven" in the singular did not exist until He made the distinction between the one supernal heaven, in which the will of God is fulfilled completely, and the others. Therefore, may His will be fulfilled on earth as it is in the one supreme heaven.

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The next petition in the Lord's Prayer is, "Give us this day our daily bread."

Our bread comes ultimately from Him.

A child thanked her mother for the bread she had given her. The mother replied, "You'd better thank the baker." The baker said, "Better thank the miller." The miller said, "Better thank the farmer." The farmer said, "It was not my doing. The seed, the rain, the sun, and

the minerals in the earth come from God. Thank Him.”

It is a fact that our bread also comes to us through the agency of men.

The plenitude of food in the rich nations contrasts starkly with hunger in the Third World, in countries like Bangladesh and Ethiopia. The one who eats bread without discernment sins. We are to eat only *our* daily bread, since it is only for this we ask. We are not to eat unjustly someone else's bread or to deprive the poor and hungry of their due. In fact, the Scripture has much to say about feeding the hungry.

It is not normal to pray for sunrise, over which we have no control. But to pray for bread and righteousness is acceptable because these involve our collaboration.

One should not pray “Give *me* this day *my* daily bread” but “Give *us*...”

In Exodus 23:25 it is written, “Ye [plural] shall serve the Lord your God, and He will bless thy [singular] bread.” Eating is always an individual act, even at a common meal. Praying is a collective act: when we pray we are united in spirit with all those who pray.

\* \* \*

Prayer for the daily bread, that is the substance of our lives, includes prayer for healing.

Some might say that sickness comes from God and it is a sin to pray against it. But asking God for deliverance from physical evils is no different from asking for deliverance from spiritual evils. While we do not force God through prayer, perhaps we keep Him

from helping by not praying. Perhaps He wants to help, but we lack the precondition of faithful receptiveness.

"The prayer of the church produces great healing miracles," wrote Luther. "In our time, it has recalled me from the grave many times when I was sick unto death; also my wife Kathy, who was deathly ill, and Philip Milanchthon, who was deathly sick in 1540 in Weimar. Though liberation from death and deliverance from bodily dangers are bad miracles, we should mention them because of our weakness in faith."

My wife, my son and I have many times been saved from serious illness and dangers of death.

\* \* \*

We ask for no more than our bread today. There is no prayer for luxuries. And there is no prayer for tomorrow's needs.

A man who has a millionaire for his father has enough with one dollar in his pocket.

At the wedding in Cana, Mary said, "There is no wine." Probably we would have said many days before, "There won't be enough wine." We should not worry in prayer about situations far removed.

But much more is involved in the petition for daily bread.

The Jews had known for over a thousand years that their ancestors had received bread from heaven for forty years when travelling in the desert from Egypt toward Canaan. It was called manna.

Then Jesus appeared and told them that the manna

which kept them alive was not bread from heaven, but that He Himself is the bread of life which came from heaven. Men must feed on Him. He became even more specific: they must eat His flesh and drink His blood.

The manna from heaven was such that those who ate it died, whereas those who eat His flesh and drink His blood will be resurrected.

How should they eat His flesh? Should they kill Him? Should they become cannibals—as some of the ancients suspected? To Jews, the consuming of blood was forbidden by divine law.

We read all these things in John 6, where the words of Jesus are recorded. What do they mean? Hearing these words, many of His disciples left Him, saying they were hard to understand. Do I understand them?

The Bible is often unintelligible without the realization that man is not a self but a cluster of selves. Psychology speaks about split personalities, about the subconscious, the id, ego, and superego. The Bible speaks about the outer man and the hidden man of the heart. We are like those toy eggs that contain another egg. We have not only syndromes, psychoses, and neuroses, but within our self there is another principal self. The two are at odds with each other.

The outer man discards as nonsense the thoughts of the inner man. The hidden man of the heart considers all that the outer man feeds on as inconsequential. If there was manna, it does not deserve to be called bread from heaven.

The outer man finds pleasure in life by following his

instincts. He really needs no great examples. He prays only for bread for the body.

The inner man seeks imposing models. The highest models to emulate are those who give their lives for others, men who give their flesh to be torn, their blood to be shed, that mankind might have truth, love, and happiness. Jesus knows Himself as the *model* in this. The inner man will feed on His sacrifice. This is the daily bread for which the inner man prays.

"Our daily bread" is a translation at random. The Greek word rendered in English "daily" is what is called a *hapax*, a word found only once not only in the New Testament but in the whole of old Greek literature. "Daily" is a word invented by the translators of the sayings of Jesus.

*Epiusion* has been rendered as "necessary for life," "daily," "supernatural," "heavenly." St Jerome believes the original Aramean was *mahar*—"of tomorrow."

Etymologically, the most likely sense is *epi*—"super"—*ousion*—"substance." Therefore "supersubstantial." This is how St. Jerome translated it.

In any case, not only bakery bread is meant here. The first missionaries who went to Greenland where bread was completely unknown translated this message with "Our daily fish give us today"

Once in the Kingdom, we will drink with Jesus a new wine. (Matthew 26:29) At that meal, the banquet of the Lamb, we will also have a new bread, the supersubstantial bread. We would like to have a foretaste, a morsel of it even now. This too is the sense of "Give us this day our

daily bread.”

Jesus had assured us that if we ask bread, we will surely not receive a stone.

Many a hungry Christian prisoner has asked for actual bread and received from his captors a beating instead. But Jesus is the bread of life. Those who ask for this bread will never be disappointed.

\* \* \*

Give us *this* day our daily bread.”

There is a special day called “*this* day.” It is written, “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.” (Hebrews 3:7,8) “Exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today.’ ” (v.13)

Today is the day to accept Jesus as your Savior, to begin a life of prayer, to ask for and receive forgiveness, to walk in newness of life, to live in peace with others and with yourself.

In Hebrew, a specific word for “today” does not even exist. The expression *Ha-yom* was used, which means literally “*the* day.” Only today is “*the*” day.

What about yesterday and tomorrow? They might be important on the calendar, but in the language of the people of God they are nonentities. Where is yesterday? Where is last year’s snow? Where is tomorrow? Will it exist?

Therefore in Hebrew there are no specific words for yesterday. *Ethmol*, used just once in the Bible, means also “of late,” “beforetime,” “heretofore,” “in time past,” “of old.” *Emesh*, another expression translated

“yesterday,” can mean “in former time.”

The tomorrow did not seem important enough for the Hebrews to designate a word for it. They used *machar*, which can mean “time to come.”

Only today is *the* day.

How many could sleep quietly at night in a Communist jail while anticipating the suffering and sorrow he would endure the next day? Christians could smile. “Which tomorrow?” Tomorrows are not a reality. Only today is *the* day. Today I lie quietly on the floor. No one beats me now. I have asked of God all I need only for *today*.

The word “today” in the Lord’s Prayer helped me much during my years in jail.

Jesus taught us to relegate to yesterday the pains that fall on what is today by the calendar. When He felt forsaken by God on the cross, instead of saying the grammatically correct “My God, My God, why do You forsake Me?” He used the past tense: “My God, “My God, why have You forsaken Me?” He puts His doubts spiritually in the past. This is what Christians do with all their nagging anxieties and fears. The today is taken care of. Today I receive my daily bread and the daily satisfaction of my needs. What oppresses me is not a problem of today but only a shadowed memory of time long past.

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The next petition in the Lord’s Prayer is “And forgive us *our* trespasses.”

Not only criminals but also good men need forgiveness. But what if one has not committed heinous sins? Augustine writes: "It makes no difference whether you are buried under a weight of lead or sand. The lead forms a mass, while sand is composed of small grains, but its profusion can also crush you. You say your mistakes are small. Don't you see that the infinitude of small drops fills rivers and causes landslides? The mistakes are small? Ah, but they are numerous!"

So we all need to pray "Forgive us our trespasses."

Before saying these words, it is good to ponder for a short while on what sins we have committed. If we are honest, we will discover that sin is never unipersonal. No sins has been committed by one man alone.

We should ask for the forgiveness of all who made us sin: ancestors from whom we have inherited sinful inclinations, parents, educators, companions, those who provoked us to anger or wrong-doing, the media that influenced us for evil. It is written in Jeremiah 15:20, "We acknowledge O, Lord, our wickedness and the iniquity of our fathers."

An angel promised that Jesus would "save His people from their sins," from all sins. I am forgiven for my individual sins and my participation in the collective sins of my family, nation, race, church, and so on. I am saved from the sins which I have transmitted to others through my genes or propagated by word or writing or example.

\* \* \*

God knows only how to forgive to the uttermost.

St. John of Kronstadt said, "Often I have been a great sinner during the day, and in the evening, after the prayer, I have gone to bed as a man justified, whiter than snow.

"Every event of the day should be made a point of departure for prayer. When we wash, we should think about cleansing from sin and pray for it. New garments should remind us of spiritual rebirth, the putting away of old garments, the undressing of the old man."

\* \* \*

After saying "Forgive us our trespasses," we not only receive cleansing, but the sin itself becomes an element of our cleanness.

It is written in Isaiah 1:18, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they [the sins, not only the sinner] shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

King David was what we would call today a war criminal. He killed not only enemy soldiers, but in a shrewd manner one of his own soldiers in order to cover up for his adultery with the man's beautiful wife. Then he took her for himself.

But he repented deeply. His sins had become "white as snow." There was no longer any reason to be ashamed of them. Why should an adulterer be afraid of the remembrance of a former deed that has the lily-whiteness of virginity?

Looking back on his past life, he sings: "The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according

to the cleanness of my hands He has recompensed me. For I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not wickedly departed from my God.

“For all His judgements were before me; and as for His statutes, I did not depart from them. I was also blameless before Him, and I kept myself from my iniquity.

“Therefore the Lord had recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to my cleanness *in His eyes*. “(II Samuel 22:21-25)

This is how the biography of a forgiven sinner, even criminal, looks from heaven, how it is recorded above. This is how the enlightened sinner looks upon his past life if he has repented.

An ounce of salt can change the taste of a soup but not the taste of the waters of the Amazon. Sin, even one single sin, can destroy the life of a human being. But a man who has repented belongs to the family of the eternal God. He becomes a partaker of God's nature. He is flesh of the flesh and bone of the bones of Christ. Through the unfathomable grace of God he emerges from a life of sin unpolluted.

Such is God's forgiveness.

He says about David, who had committed adultery and murder, “My servant David kept My commandments and followed Me with all his heart, to do *only* what was right in My eyes.” (I Kings 14:8)

When Jesus changed water into wine, it was into the best wine, which is the old wine. It did not have to go through a process; it was instantaneously what He

wanted it to be.

On a certain occasion God restored to Hezekiah ten hours of his life. Let us imagine his petition was granted at 6 p.m.; it was 8 o'clock in the morning of the same day. All the evil deeds that he might have committed between 8 a.m. and 6 p.m. were no more. He could fill the time with only righteous deeds and then write a psalm extolling the sinless life he had lived that day.

\* \* \*

By understanding that confessed sins become white, the color of purity (the Talmud says that sins forgiven become virtues already practiced), we possess an extraordinary key to the Old Testament.

So many sins and horrible acts are described by the prophets and chroniclers of ancient Israel. A large proportion of these recounted evils took place in the lives of great men of God. Why should the Bible contain such stories? Only because they no longer retain their original color. They serve to illustrate that nothing pollutes the repentant sinner, that in heaven's eyes he is a saint who never did anything wrong and never failed to do what was right.

Sin is a grave matter, not to be taken lightly. But Jesus says there is more joy in heaven about the repentance of one sinner than about a hundred righteous people. Without my sin and my repentance, angels would lack an incomparable joy. Should anyone doubt that even the vilest sinners can be forgiven or that God provides angels with the most exquisite joy?

The Catholic church has a strange song: "O blessed sin which gave us such a Savior!"

\* \* \*

There is one condition though: we must forgive those who sin against us.

"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Not those who "trespassed" in the past. We forgive those who trespass while they trespass. We forgive without any precondition, even without repentance on their part.

There is even more in this verse. The Greek original reads, "Forgive us our trespasses as we *forgave* [*afekamen*, in the past tense] those who trespass against us."

A Christian does not have to fulfill the difficult duty of forgiving. How can one forgive a torturer while he is torturing? A Christian is a man who has long since forgiven.

The moment one becomes a disciple of Christ, he forgives all wrong done to him in the past and all wrong that will be done to him in the future. He meets in life forgiven thieves, forgiven crooks, forgiven haters, forgiven torturers. All are clean in his eyes.

\* \* \*

Can a person forgive only sins committed against his own person or also sins committed against others?

Simon Wiesenthal, known as the hunter of war criminals, recounts in his book, *The Sunflower*, the

following episode from his life.

Working as a Jewish slave-laborer in a hospital under the Nazis, he was called to the bedside of a dying Nazi murderer. The Nazi confessed to him that he belonged to a group of SS men who had killed a group of Jews with flame-throwers. One Jew holding a child in his arms jumped burning from the window, hoping to escape. This Nazi shot them both.

A few days later, he was at the front, where he was mortally wounded. He had lost his eyesight. The last thing he remembered was the sight of the burning Jew and the child coming toward him.

He asked that a Jew be brought to him so that he might beg forgiveness. In response, Wiesenthal left his bed without saying a word. He could not forgive.

Forty years have passed. The Nazi-hunter has no quiet in his heart. He has consulted quite a number of theologians, who, wishing to be nice to him, have justified his refusal to forgive. He excuses himself with the assertion that a man can forgive only what is done to him not what has been done to others.

Jesus knows better. He said to His disciples, "If *you* forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them." (John 20:23) We can forgive anyone who repents of any sin committed against anyone else. We can do so even in the hope that he will repent.

Can I determine if my repentance has been genuine, acceptable, valid? I can only count on God's generosity. Then let us accord the same grace to others.

Corrie ten Boom was in a Nazi extermination camp

for the crime of having hidden Jews...Her whole family perished there.

After the war, she met at a rally a former prison guard, whom she remembered vividly with a whip in his hand. Her father and sister had died at the hands of men like him.

In the encounter, she remembered that Jesus taught that those who do not forgive will not be forgiven, but she hesitated. It was difficult for her to accept the hand proffered to her.

Only that forgiveness is not a question of sentiment but of will, she says. She put her hand in his and said weeping, "I forgive you, brother, with all my heart."

Beware of speaking words against your own life. Without a forgiving spirit, you destroy yourself if you express the desire to be forgiven as you forgive.

There are two versions of the Lord's Prayer. Matthew quotes Jesus as saying, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," whereas Luke writes, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Today the word "debts" conveys an entirely different image from that evoked in Jesus' day. At that time unpaid debts could lead to jail and to perpetual slavery.

Jesus' contemporaries also had another notion of sin than does our lax generation. Sin was something horrible which led to hell.

But happily, debts and sins and trespasses, whatever and however many they are, can all be forgiven by God. Otherwise, our forgiveness should be freely given

and all-embracing.

Jesus, in His matchless Sermon on the Mount, went even further. He said that if we offer a sacrifice and suddenly remember that someone has something against us, we should stop everything and first give forgiveness.

Regrettably, I cannot explain the next words in the "Our Father": "Lead us not into temptation."

I know no man who can explain all Bible verses. In fact, I wonder about commentators who set out to interpret every word of Scripture. Are all mysteries known to them? He who poses as knowing all may be suspected of knowing nothing.

We seek the sense of every passage of Scripture, though some might contain depth rather than sense.

I confess I do not understand this part of Scripture, as I cannot find any justification for the words of Jesus in Luke 14:26: "If anyone...does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters,...he cannot be My disciple."

Did He hate His parents, brothers and sisters? I really began to love my family only after I knew Jesus.

So I remind myself that He would be an insignificant teacher if He propounded only what I can understand.

Therefore, the explanation I give myself regarding the discordant teaching that we must hate all our relatives to be Jesus' disciples is that He said these words while surrounded by "great multitudes." (Luke 14:25)

He wanted to avoid the sort of popularity that would have threatened His saving mission, which included

rejection and crucifixion by His people. This repulsive teaching, then, is not intended for us, but was a means to an end at that time -- the end to make Jews not accept His teachings. Everywhere else Jesus teaches only love, including love for one's enemies. How then could we hate our families?

The words "lead us not into temptation" are also dark for me, until I will understand I will choose not to remain in a situation where I am likely to have gross temptations.

\* \* \*

There exist specific temptations of the saints.

St. Isaac, the Syrian speaks about a spiritual law according to which the higher one ascends on the road to holiness, the more he will be attracted by unimaginable depths of sin.

We consider it strange to meet with this law in the spiritual realm, but it is parallel to what happens in the physical world. For instance, every movement of a boat engages forces in the water that obstruct this motion. Increase in speed rapidly increases the resistance.

St. Isaac writes: "As soon as you feel in your soul different, very strong temptations, know that your soul has really advanced toward a higher step and that the grace given to it has been multiplied.

"According to the greatness of grace, God leads in the same measure to the sorrow of temptations."

The deepest valley rift in the world lies in the Arabah valley in Israel. Through it the Jordan flows to the Dead

Sea.

So the saintliest souls pass through the deepest torments. Sky-diving from high altitudes is the most dangerous sport of all. Diving into the depths of God's mysteries is also fraught with danger. The most renowned saints have passed through what is called "the dark night of the soul."

The Syrian continues, "The soul that does not have the power for great temptations does not have it for great gifts either."

God does not give one without the other. Even great saints wonder about temptations to gross sins such as whoredom and even blasphemy. Quite a few have succumbed to them. Some have come back from such great falls.

In *Philokalia* we have the words of St. Maxim the Martyr: "If the mind succeeds in loving God, the temptation of a spirit of blasphemy starts and suggests to him thoughts which no human mind can invent, but only the devil, their father."

Blessed Nikita Stifat also said, according to the same book: "A horde of not-easily-defeated passions to blaspheme, whose source is satanic pride, attacks those who live in godly good deeds, but especially those who succeed in prayer and contemplation of godly realities...They besiege us when we pray and sing psalms and make us pronounce, through our inattention, curses against ourselves and strange blasphemies against the Most High God, interweaving them in verses of the psalms and in the words of prayer."

No wonder: in the end, every sin is a blasphemy against God.

Such temptations come frequently to saints when they are facing death.

Such times of terrible temptations are hours "filled with despair and fear," hours when "the hope in God and the comfort of faith in Him disappear completely from a soul." This "terrible state of darkness" can bring men to the threshold of death.

Even worse things happen to saints, about which Paul writes that it is better not to mention them. In his time, depth psychology was not yet known. Therefore he was fearful.

We have to accept such terrible temptations as a fact of life and pray, even if we lack great understanding, "Lead us not into temptation."

One who heard about the saintliness of Anthony the Great found, to his surprise, that the cell was surrounded by devils. Greatly disappointed, he said to the monk, "I would have expected to see angels around you."

St. Anthony replied, "Angels surround pubs, trying to win the drunkards for God. We monks are left with devils around us."

The Bible says the "spiritual hosts of wickedness" [are] in the heavenly place. (Ephesians 6:12)

\* \* \*

Our weakness prays, "Don't lead us into temptation at all." The saints understand that we have to bear with thorns in our flesh, knowing His grace will be sufficient

for us.

The *Fathers of the Desert* contains the story of a young monk who was fervent in prayer like no one else in the monastery, but who also committed gross sins after praying. Then he would run to church asking forgiveness from God with many tears. He obtained the assurance of forgiveness, but it did not keep him from going back and sinning again. So he swung like a pendulum from wickedness to faith and back.

Then one day he committed the worst sins of all. Frightened by what he had done, he ran to church again to obtain forgiveness, and Jesus appeared at the entrance to the altar, stretching out His hands toward him to forgive. But the devil appeared too, saying, "You cannot accept this man who always comes from church to me."

Jesus replied, "I am the Master. You cannot dictate to me whom to receive and whom not. I cannot allow you to be better than me. You always receive him when he comes from church to you. Why should I not accept him when he comes from the devil to me?"

"I will accept him, and even more, I will give him this time the power to resist future temptations."

This monk was young, but the Orthodox also have an obviously not much publicized story from the life of St. Macarius.

Being a monk known for his purity, he nevertheless sinned with a woman. When she became pregnant, he killed her to cover up his sin. After this he repented and became a great saint.

We must not be too amazed about this. Was King David any better?

Great are the temptations of saints. Therefore the prayer "Deliver us from temptation," though dark, is most important.

\* \* \*

There might be a further meaning to the prayer "Lead us not into temptation."

This prayer is addressed to God, who lives in me. Whenever one asks for daily bread, forgiveness of sin, and deliverance from evil, it is an appeal to God in heaven, but also in my heart. I conceive of these petitions as being addressed also to me.

I have to do my part that needy people be fed, that forgiveness reign among men, that the downtrodden be freed. I must also do my utmost to ensure that there are fewer temptations in the world.

\* \* \*

The final petition is "Deliver us from evil."

We may ask God for deliverance, but we must carefully avoid prescribing to God the time, place or mode of action in coming to our rescue. We must set no conditions but leave it entirely to Him to adopt whatever course of action seems best.

For thousands of years the Church has prayed "Deliver us from evil," and then power is given to an apocalyptic beast "to make war with the saints and overcome them." (Revelation 13:5-7) Today Commu-

nists and Moslems slaughter Christians.

There is only one hope, the hope against every hope, and this hope can prove true. John Bunyan wrote, "Hope is never ill when faith is well."

The victory of evil over Jesus, who was crucified, was the fulfillment of the prayers of millions for thousands of years for deliverance from the evils of sin and death.

The evil from which you are not delivered today may play a similar role.

Chrysostom wrote: "May we not teach Him how to help us.

"When we hand our case to a lawyer who represents us before secular courts, we only tell him the situation. But we leave to him the manner of how to defend us. Even more should we behave like this with God. Tell Him your desire, but do not dare to teach Him how to help you. He knows best what is useful for you.

"There are people who say in their prayers thousands of particular wishes: 'Lord, give me bodily health, double my property, punish my enemies, etc.' This is very unreasonable. God knows Himself how to help you.

"Never complain against the one who saddened you. Because this is the character of the judge. He hears and gives gifts preferably to those who pray for their enemies and are not resentful about evils endured."

\* \* \*

The prayer to be delivered from evil has another

aspect.

The Christian knows that in this world he may be the victim of evil, like his Master. He embraces the cross, with a love that can only baffle or embarrass the non-Christian.

Hailo, a Soviet Christian committed to a psychiatric asylum for his faith, wrote to the fifteen children he left behind, "For nothing in the world would I give up my cross." Kolbantsev, another imprisoned Russian Christian, wrote from jail, "We should not avoid crosses." Nijole Sadunaite, a nun from Soviet Lithuania, said when sentenced, "This is the most beautiful day of my life."

This is a paradox no atheist can comprehend.

Again, we are a complex of selves: the outward man and the inner man. The outward man wishes to be freed from the troubles and evils of life. The hidden man wishes to be freed from the dangers of travelling any other road than the way of the cross. He feels safe only when he is close to the Man of Sorrows.

Both these selves which constitute the "I" speak in prayer.

The Russian secret Orthodox magazine *Nadezhda* ("Hope") contains an excerpt from the memoirs of a prison-chaplain of Czarist times, the priest Volighyn.

In jail, he says, there was a man sentenced for two murders. An amazing Christian, he suffered more than all other prisoners because he always volunteered to take punishment for other inmates.

On his deathbed he told his story to the confessor.

Coming home one day, he found his wife's lover bending over her corpse. He had just killed her.

Surprised with the bloody knife in his hand, the paramour asked forgiveness. The Christian not only forgave the wretched man but took the crime upon himself, confessing to the police and the judges that he was the killer. He was given a life sentence.

Once in jail, he took upon himself a murder committed by another criminal and received a second life sentence.

The priest to whom he confessed said, "How happy you must be to finish with all this and go to heaven."

The prisoner replied, "May God's will be done. But if the Heavenly Father would ask me, I would tell Him that my preference is to continue in pain here. I don't believe that even in heaven there exists a greater joy that to suffer innocently for others."

Such an extraordinary experience shows that the prayer "Deliver us from evil" need not mean to be detached from its physical presence but rather from its mental and spiritual pollution. We live in a sinful world, but it is possible for a Christian nevertheless to have joy and inner peace. For this reason many saints, such as the one in Czarist Russia, have endured—and even sought—experiences in their lives considered unbearable by ordinary men.

\* \* \*

The prayer as phrased by Jesus is first and foremost a petition to be delivered from the evil within.

St. John of Kronstadt said, "When we pray 'Deliver us from evil' we should examine ourselves to see if at some point we do not live in friendship with the devil."

How can God deliver us from someone to whom we cling?

The renowned rabbi of Gher travelled in a carriage together with another Jew. As they descended a steep mountainside, the horses struggled to maintain their footing and nearly lost control, thus endangering the carriage and its passengers.

The Jew, afraid for his life, observed that the rabbi remained calm and composed during this episode. When the danger had passed, he asked him how he could keep so quiet. "You did not even pray that we be delivered!"

The rabbi replied, "Whoever keeps before his eyes the one great evil is no longer concerned about other evils."

The one great evil is to sadden the heart of God by missing life eternal. Avoid this one evil and you will find yourself delivered from all the rest.

\* \* \*

While living in a spirit of prayer, it is important to be delivered from selfishness, from a life preoccupied first of all with the ego.

I knew a man who had been in a solitary cell for years in an underground jail, without ever hearing a voice or a whisper, without seeing the sun, a tree, a flower, without books or paper or washing facilities.

Sometimes he felt Jesus very near and heard Him ask, "Is it too hard on you?" He replied, "Thank You for Your concern. But I can bear it. Better see to the others."

There is something better than to ask God for help. It is to tell Him He can be quiet about you. Why should you sadden His heart? He knows what is happening to you. How much better to promise you will be faithful in spite of suffering.

A woman who had an incurable hemorrhage for many years touched Jesus' garment to be healed. She succeeded, but she must have learned afterwards that for this, "power had gone out of Him." (Mark 5:30) Would she have touched Him again for further needs with the knowledge that it meant a loss of power for Him? Might she not have desired that He keep this power for someone in greater distress?

Many complain that they do not receive what they pray for. There is confusion here.

People pray largely because they desire many things. In real prayer, desires change. Before praying, we desire things. But we receive not what we desired before praying. We get what we desire while praying. Ascending on the ladder of prayer, the true Christian comes to desire only God's happiness. Every real prayer is actually a prayer *for* God, for His peace and serenity. It is an invitation to the heavenly Bridegroom, formulated by the bride, to embrace her, that they may miss each other. This prayer gets answered.

\* \* \*

When all is said and done, however, the question

still remains: Does any miracle of deliverance happen as a result of praying "Deliver us from evil"?

Christians recite the Lord's Prayer. Jews recite the words of Psalm 140, "Deliver me, Lord, from evil men, preserve me from violent men." (v. 1) Do such miracles happen?

If no such wonders ever took place, we would have the greatest miracle of all: that millions of people utter such prayers with faith and confidence despite the fact that no one ever received help.

But we have evidence that help from God can be obtained. I prayed such prayers and was delivered from both Fascist and Communist prisons; likewise, my wife. She and I were also delivered from many other critical dangers. Countless others can give a similar testimony.

The question then arises, can we be sure the answers are the result of prayer rather than chance?

An example has been given by C. S. Lewis. He says if he were in the mountains and were threatened by an avalanche, he might pray that it would bypass him. And his prayer might be answered. A skeptic would say that the avalanche missed him because of some boulders that obstructed its path. Nevertheless, he feels that his prayer has been answered, even though the outcome could have been predetermined. The question is whether the answered prayer is an illusion or the action of God's foreknowledge.

Lewis concludes that God's mercy, which is a deep unseen background to existence, has spared his life. Through prayer he has contact with this unseen ambi-

ence, with this reality outside of time in which we are heard before we pray.

Prayer is the connecting link with this ultimate background, which means that the laws of nature can become our friends if we choose to do God's will.

Do we complain about unanswered prayers?

The story is told of a man whose house was threatened by a flood. As the waters rose, he escaped to the roof of his house and prayed to be saved from the imminent catastrophe.

A man passing by in a rowboat offered him a place. "Enter into a shaky rowboat? No, thanks. I prayed to God. He will provide."

Later, a helicopter flew overhead, and a voice called to him from a bullhorn. "We will lower a rope and draw you up!"

"Thanks, but that's not for me. I always avoided flying. I have prayed to God. He will not forsake me."

The waters continued to mount, and soon the man was swept away and drowned. When he arrived in heaven, he said to St. Peter, "I am in a very nice place and I have no complaints. But how is it that God did not answer my prayer for relief? He promised we would get what we asked for."

St. Peter looked up the incident in a book and replied, "It is noted here that God sent you relief twice, but you did not accept it."

Sometimes we miss the help that is proffered because we have other ideas.

\* \* \*

As a rule, which prayers are fulfilled?

Surely all prayers for the past, without question. Everyone can obtain from God complete forgiveness for all the sins we have ever committed, that our spirits may no longer be encumbered by them.

We can obtain peace of mind regarding the future by the simple fact that in prayer we realize there is no sense in worrying about tomorrow. Jesus said, "Tomorrow will worry about its own things." (Matthew 6:34)

The Russian Christian Alexander Krugovich wrote from jail, where he was detained for his faith: "God has put it in my heart to consider worries about tomorrow as crimes against the mind. Why? The Scripture says clearly, 'Don't worry about tomorrow.' What interpretations and clarifications are needed? All seems clear.

"On the other hand, don't we realize that even after making a sincere, decisive step to entrust Him with all things and not to worry ourselves, wrong thoughts and concerns still burden us and we are their prisoners? Whence do they come? Surely not from the One who calls us. What is it then, forgivable weakness or sin? Let us reason about this.

"First, from Holy Scriptures we are convinced that worries are the devil's gifts to us. He wishes us to take our eyes off Christ, at least for a moment, and off His blessings. Peter, too, did not look long at the waves. It would have been enough to make him perish if the Lord had not intervened."

(Here he refers to an episode in the Gospel about Jesus walking once on the Sea of Galilee and Peter, who

was in a boat, asking to do the same. Jesus agreed, but when Peter walked toward Him, he glanced down at the turbulent waves and began to sink. It was only the intervention of Jesus that saved him from drowning.)

“Second, worries hurt the good name of the Word of God and also of Jesus, the incarnation of God’s word...”

“Striving to solve everything with our power, we expel Christ from our lives as if disappointed because He does not help. But He wishes to bear all our burdens.”

“Third, our worries about ourselves indicate a lack of trust in God. It is written that the Jews who were freed by God from Egyptian slavery could not enter the Holy Land ‘because of their unbelief.’ We know that ‘without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a reward for those who diligently seek Him.’ We must ‘ask in faith, with no doubting’...”

“Fourth, our worries express more or less our pride, our hidden conceit that we can solve our needs even without God.”

Therefore, Christians are quiet about their future.

As for the present, what does a person need who is really in prayer, in the embrace of Jesus?

Chrysostom wrote, “If you have many merits and are not conscious of any evils, all your prayers will be inefficient. But when you feel on your conscience the heavy burden of sin and consider yourself the least of all, you will find great trust in God.”

You will then be like the prodigal son, who returned

to the Father and was received with a kiss and a feast in his honor. What more does one need at that moment?

Michel Horev, whose father had died in Communist dungeons, was sentenced to ten years in Soviet jails for his faith and became almost blind there. Yet he had the courage to write: "If I glorify him in jail, what do I need liberty for? If I sanctify Him through death, why do I need life?"

\* \* \*

Some prayers receive a reply apart—the silence of God. Sometimes He shows His love without words, without deeds. Receive this answer with reverence.

Not everyone has remarkable experiences in prayer that reveal its depths.

Today agriculture is largely mechanized. But one generation ago in Central Europe, and even today in most of the world, oxen were yoked together day after day and hitched to a plough, without ever realizing that their work was of any value. So we have to do our duty to pray, even if it seems useless. One day we will realize that others have reaped a rich harvest of good gifts from our modest prayers.

\* \* \*

I come back. Many of our most important prayers remain unfulfilled? Jesus said we will have our desires fulfilled if we pray and believe. There is no promise for prayer without faith.

A congregation gathered in a time of drought to pray for rain. Old Paulin came with an umbrella. People

asked her why she brought the umbrella. She wondered why the others have not done the same. She told them "You may become wet on your way home, because we pray for rain."

She was the only one who had brought to the prayer meeting a token of her faith.

A lady, 75 years old, had suffering legs and could not walk. She prayed to God for healing but added "I am old. The time for improving has passed." She was right. If one's faith is like this, the state of the leg cannot improve. One taught her to read and believe in Psalm 103 "Your youth is renewed like an eagle's," after which she could run almost like a marathon runner. She died at 80, walking until her last day.

If we would pray with faith "Your kingdom come and your will be done", there would be no Communism and no Islam and the will of God would be done on earth. God can make today that on earth there should be the same conditions as in heaven.

It is not only the guilt of the persecutors if brethren and sisters have to suffer much. We share the guilt because of our lack of faith. God has put His might at our disposal provided we pray and believe.

We accuse the unbelievers. Their lack of faith allegedly brings catastrophies on the world. But God rebukes for them His chosen people. If we would believe we would see God's glory. Jesus promised this to Martha.

We believe in the spread of Communism, crime, immorality and it happened according to our faith. We

get what we believed will be.

A believer in Bremen, West Germany, had prayed that on a certain day there should be no car accidents in her town. The newspaper reported afterward that during two days there were no accidents and on the third just a light one. Could we not all make such experiments? The name of that lady is Ruth Schneider. She lives in Bremen on Rekumer Str.151.

If we would agree in prayer and faith there should be no disasters, there would be none. The same God could open all prisons in which believers suffer for their convictions.

Paul says we should pray for all in authority that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life. (I Timothy 2:2-3) The first church in Jerusalem experimented this once. Peter was in jail. She prayed for his release not for months and years, but just one evening. One evening of prayer with faith. On the same evening, he was free.

I have written and preached during years of Christians bound in Communist jails, but James says "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much". (5.16) Let us be righteous and let our prayers be fervent. Then we will succeed.

\* \* \*

Finally, prayer is not only a litany of petitions. There is also the prayer of praise.

A Christian visited an asylum, where he was accosted by an inmate behind bars. "Hey, are you here only to visit the sick, or are you made sick yourself?"

The man replied, "I am a visitor."

"Are you really only a visitor? Did you ever thank God for having a brain that functions well, a sane mind so that you can think rightly?"

"To tell the truth, I never did."

"Then come and join me. You too are a fool."

Prayer should be in large part a response of thankfulness for everything God gives us.

In the original of Psalm 50:23 it is written, "Whoever sacrifices praise glorifies Me." There exist praises that are heavy sacrifices. In extreme situations, when one feels rather like despairing and quarreling with God, praising Him instead is a magnificent service offered to Him.

\* \* \*

The Lord's Prayer ends with the words, "For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory."

Every good He does for us should bring glory to His name. That is what we desire.

We are saying in effect, "Yours is the kingdom, and if You do not do good to me, enemies will say that Your kingdom is badly managed and You do not have the power to rule."

All the grounds for our requests reside in God, not in ourselves. Therefore we may have only boldness. This is Mose's, argument in Exodus 32: 7-12: "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Go, down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made

themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" "

"And the Lord said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people! Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation.' "

"Then Moses pleaded with the Lord his God, and said: 'Lord, why does Your wrath burn hot against Your people whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians speak, and say, "He brought them out to harm them, to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth?" Turn from Your fierce wrath, and relent from this harm to Your people.' "

When Jesus said "Thine is the glory," He must have used the word *kavod*, which also means in Hebrew "riches" and "burdens."

"Thine is the burden"—this is the thought with which a Hebrew concludes the Lord's Prayer. Christians cast all their burdens upon Him, because He invites them to do so, and thus they are free.

\* \* \*

There is just one more, but very important, word in this prayer, the "Amen." Blessed is the person who can meaningfully say at least this one word.

Luther said that every prayer not followed by

“Amen” is not valid.

The word probably comes into the Hebrew tongue from the Egyptian *Amon*. Amon was one of their gods, whose name meant “the one identical with himself,” somewhat similar to the name of Jehovah, “I AM WHAT I AM.”

The “Amen” is an assurance given to God that the prayer was not only said with the lips, but with the heart and mind as well.

A little girl overheard a physician telling her father, “Unfortunately, there is no more hope for your wife. She will die.” The girl went to another room knelt down, and prayed, “Dear God, please don’t listen to this bad man. I want mother to live.” She then changed her voice and said, “Yes, Suzy, I assure you, your mother will remain with you.” Suzy changed her voice again and said, “Thank you, God, for the promise You just gave me.” She went to her father and said, “God just said ‘Amen’ to my prayer.”

The “Amen” has this double role: it identifies you with your prayer and is at the same time a ratification by God, who lives in you, that the prayer has been accepted.

The reciting of the “Our Father” glorifies God effectively when it comes from the mouth of a pure devotee. To say the Lord’s Prayer and center it on “Thy will be done” makes of it simply an hour of loving intimacy with God.

\* \* \*

Another model of prayer is found in John 17.

Here Jesus says to the Father, "You have given the Son authority...that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him." (v. 2) Repeating these words after Jesus, we are reminded that to every human being others are given—his family, his neighbors, his business associates, his friends—that he in turn might give them what he has best.

Remarkably, in this prayer Jesus says about the apostles, "They have kept Your word" (v. 6), though there had been many instances when they had not done so. But Christians would do well to read not only the Bible, but also the Book of the Righteous ("*Jasher*"), a book accredited by the Bible. (II Samuel 1:18)

Saul was a man who had done much evil and had tried many times to kill David, but David never said one bad word against him. In fact, after Saul was dead, he composed an elegy in his honor, containing no mention of his sins but only words of praise.

David had the power and military might to overthrow Saul and his wicked regime. Such an act would certainly have been justifiable from the point of view of the outward man who wants to live in peace. But David allowed the evil to continue its course in order to show that the wicked can be loved, tolerated, even praised. This is what he did in the Book of the Righteous, wisely been kept secret from the world, which could not have borne it. Instead, we have only one short excerpt from it in the Bible.

It is full with praise and only praise of Saul, his greatest foe.

Besides Saul, David praised other enemies of his who had died. He calls his foe Abner, "a prince and a great man" (II Samuel 2:38) and Ishbosheth, his rival to the throne, "a righteous person." (II Samuel 4:11) As for those who fell victim to Saul during his wicked reign, God would compensate them. Jesus, too, refused to be made a king, though this meant that the scheming Herod was allowed to remain such.

Today, after almost two thousand years, we still recite in the creed the words "crucified under Pontius Pilate." Should we not put an end to condemning him? Much has been done to pass over the role of the Jewish priests in the death of Jesus. Perhaps we should do the same for Pilate.

If we read thoughtfully and repeat often the words of Jesus, we too will be enabled to take a detached view of those who offend or seek to harm us.

\* \* \*

The prayer continues: "I have given to the disciples the words which You have given Me; and they have received them,...and they have believed that You sent Me." (v. 8)

In our contacts with other men, we too have given them the word of God, and they believed us. Perhaps they accepted our beliefs without having a way of checking the substance of our faith. They have simply put their trust in us. Let us never disappoint them. May we always be aware of our influence when we repeat as our own this prayer of Jesus.

As we say to God, like Jesus, "All mine are Thine," peace enters our heart. Husband, wife, parents, all who are ours are also God's. There is no need to worry. He loves and cares for them far better than we do.

The most pleasant and useful persons are those who leave some of the problems of the universe for God to worry about. Let us leave Him also our families.

Pray in the place of those you love who do not pray. Repent in their place for the sins of which they do not repent. Bring sacrifices, as did Job, for their intention and remain quiet. Say with Jesus, "All mine are Thine."

As we repeat this prayer of Jesus, it is good for us to remember what He said to the heavenly Father about His disciples: "You have loved them as You have loved Me." (v. 23) We and those we care about are loved no less than Jesus is loved in heaven. Does He not desire, even more than I do, that they too go to heaven?

\* \* \*

Jesus says that none of his disciples is lost, "except the son of perdition." (v. 12)

Jesus must have said this with a broken heart, because He had loved Judas and had chosen him to be an apostle; but even He could not prevent one of His disciples from falling. Why do you wonder that some of your family members or dearest friends are unsaved? It is important not to blame yourself, even if you are guilty of mistakes towards them. You were meant to be witness to them, not to be perfect! But don't abandon hope for them.

We must bow our heads to decrees of Providence that we do not understand.

Why did Jesus not try to change Judas? Can we deny that He did? In His great act of service, He washed the feet of the one who would soon lead the way in the terrible act of betrayal.

Then why did Jesus not restrain him from his monstrous deed? For the same reason that it is useless to convince the sea not to ebb and flow, or to convince a wolf not to eat a lamb, or trees not bend in the wind.

There are hearts so hardened by self-will that every effort to soften them is in vain. Such was the heart of Pharaoh.

To Peter, Jesus said, "I have prayed for you." (Luke 22:32) He must have prayed for Judas too. But a man can subtract himself from the influence of even the mightiest prayer. There comes a moment when to continue would be useless, when energy on behalf of a rebel is squandered. But it is always permissible to continue praying in spite of outward evidence.

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This high-priestly prayer of Jesus is important in the fact that it teaches us not only for whom and what to pray, but also when not to pray.

Jesus continues, "I do not pray for the world." (v. 9) This is a doomed world. All the attempts of politicians, scientists, and sociologists to save it will ultimately prove to have been in vain. Doesn't world then have a strong claim on our prayers by virtue of need?

Jesus did something other than only pray for the world: He sacrificed Himself to save it. Only in this spirit can we pray effectively for the world.

In His prayers He also does not ask for all He could have obtained. He chose to limit Himself.

In Gethsemane He said, "Do you think I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matthew 26:53) Jesus knew His prayers were powerful and could undo what He came to earth to accomplish. Therefore He restrained Himself.

Prayer is a mighty force. One must be careful in applying it. A man whose prayers are powerful must not have the same passions as other men.

Elijah was powerful in prayer and misused this energy to bring a famine over the land because he had a quarrel with the king. Perhaps God had to take him away from this world to prevent any other mischief he might have done.

Luther prayed, "God we pray Thee, punish with pestilence and famine and with whatever evil, and sickness may also be on earth." (*Luther's Table Talks*) A man who feels like this should keep his mouth shut.

Jesus must have had good reasons not to take these legions of angels away from their other tasks. As for Himself, He was determined to die for the sins of the world.

Meanwhile, He does not pray for a world which has hardened its heart to God's calling, but concentrates on those who can be found.

What characterizes great saints is their utter restraint in prayer. Abraham prayed that the wicked inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah might be forgiven, but not that his son Isaac might be spared the ordeal of being offered as a sacrifice at an early age.

Many good pastors through their prayers bring peace and understanding to many families but not to their own.

Some saints are guided in their prayer life by the great words of Abraham, "I will take nothing." (Genesis 14:23) There is a place in prayer for personal needs, but its highest form consists in forgetting the self and its demands.

\* \* \*

Jesus' prayer concludes with His expressed desire that the love with which God loved Him, and not less, may be in us. (v. 26)

After applying the words of this prayer to ourselves, we should examine our hearts to see the quality of our own love.

In Jesus' prayer there is only one desire that He expresses thrice: that the disciples "may be one." It is a scandal that we have become accustomed to being less than one, to the point of not even having regrets.

The medieval rabbinical book *Toldoth Jeshu* ("The Life of Jesus") includes a legend about the Master. As a child, says the story, He was taught in school the *Aleph*, first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. When the teacher wanted to teach Him the second letter *Beth*, the Child

refused: "I will not learn another letter until I know all the mysteries of the first."

As for the figure "one," — the first figure — Jesus teaches that it is the figure of Godhead: "The Lord our God, the Lord is one." (Deuteronomy 6:4) It is also the figure of marriage: "They shall become one." (Genesis 2:24) It is the figure of His church: "The body [of Christ] is one." (I Corinthians 12:12)

As in the legend above, it makes no sense to learn the number "two" until we learn all about the figure "one." I must be one in spirit with God, the One. I must be one with my spouse. I must be one in fellowship with all my brethren in the church, which is the body of which Christ is the Head.

Jesus said these words to His disciples, who were very far from being ideal Christians. But those who believed in His resurrection were one with Thomas when he disbelieved. The peaceful were one with the quarrelsome. When Jesus said these words an avaricious traitor and a cowardly turncoat still belonged to the brotherhood. And so in our day even the most reprobate disciple must feel that we are one with him until the very last moment when he breaks away fully.

The world is divided between the developing nations and the third world, between the Socialist East and the Capitalist West, between races, nations, classes, religions.

Christians must be one. Long after the Jewish people were divided into two nations, which had sometimes been at war with each other, God said to Ezekiel

(37:16-19): "Take a stick for yourself and write on it: 'For Judah and for the children of Israel, his companions.' Then take another stick and write on it, 'For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and for all the house of Israel, his companions.'

"Then join them one to another for yourself into one stick, and they will become one in your hand...and they will be one in My hand."

Whatever these nations were in so-called "reality," they had to become one in Ezekiel's hands. Each one of us has to come to a decision: "Whatever religious strife and religious wars may occur, in my heart Christianity is one. I will embrace as my brother and sister believers of all denominations, those whose faith is still a bud and those that are flowers, those who are angel-like and those who have a long way to go. I will not quench the smoking flax."

This unity, if it exists in the heart, becomes outward reality if we speak the only language the deaf can hear and the blind see—the language of kindness, the language of the love wherewith the Father loves Christ. To be really effective, this love must extend to the extreme of self-sacrifice, e.g. to the sacrificing of one's own habits and viewpoints, since every viewpoint is a point of blindness that incapacitates one from seeing another's.

Bonhoeffer, the German Evangelical pastor martyred under Hitler, once said, "Christ was the other man." Do not be too obstinate to assert the Christ in you without doing your best to recognize what might be Christ in disguise in the man who is very different from you.

The heathen Pliny, the younger, wrote about the first Christians, "Behold how much they love one another."

Mitchipsa, king of Numidia, father of seventy children, was asked by his sons to make a will that would divide the kingdom into seventy equal parts.

In response, he ordered them each to bring two reeds, which they did. He then ordered everyone to break one reed. This they did easily. Then he gave to the oldest son seventy reeds bound in a bundle and asked him to break them. He could not, nor could the others.

Then the old father said, "My testament is that you should stick together, in fraternal union and good will. Then even the most powerful enemies will not be able to conquer you, just as you could not break the reeds tied in a bundle. But if there is discord among you, all you have will be taken away from you as easily as you were able to break the individual reeds."

We should just love and not take "practical" steps toward achieving unity. They are not practical. Jesus Himself knew no other means to accomplish unity than to pray and die for it.

Readiness to die for those who are the subject of your prayer—there is no better way to obtain your goal.

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### **Silent Prayer**

There exists silent contemplation. "Be silent in the presence of the Lord God," says the prophet Zephaniah (1:7). It is the peak of prayer when no more words pass

the lips which desire only to kiss, when the bride with palpitating heart only looks at her Beloved and her whole being cries out, "Now I wish to be Yours!"

Angelus Silesius taught, "We should not cry to God. The source is in us. If you don't block the pipe, it flows continually."

*Maneva Dharma Sostra*--the oldest religious book in the world-- says, "If prayer is said so that it cannot be heard, its value is a hundred times more. If made only in the mind, its value is a thousand times more."

The holiest prayer is that which continues when prayers cease.

St. Maximus wrote: "The highest state of prayer, they say, is when the spirit leaves the body and the world and, in the act of prayer, loses all matter and all form. To keep oneself without fail in this state, that is truly to pray without ceasing.

"Just as, in dying, the body separates itself from all the good things of this life, so the spirit that dies at the summit of prayer also leaves all the representations it has of a world. For without dying that death, it is not possible to find and live with God."

When one has arrived at this stage, all questions and doubts around prayer will have disappeared. Who should doubt whom, and who should question whom? The petitioner and the Lord have become one spirit.

The Psalmist observed that "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is not speech nor language

where their voice is not heard." (Psalm 19:1-3)

The mechanism of the universe functions faultlessly without one word being uttered. Human lives might also function much better if the number of words spoken were reduced. "Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak." (James 1:19)

The one who knows the fear of the Lord is not swift to speak even words from the Lord.

Yet in prayer we rush to bombard Him with many words before we have well understood the opening words, "Our Father."

It would be a sin against the art of silence if I were to speak further about wordless prayer. It needs to be practiced silently, not explained verbally.

"As there exists, though, a kneeling when standing, a dancing when keeping the body unmoved, there exists a shouting without sound," said Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Worki. The elect can speak out while maintaining sacred silence.

Very unusual things may happen.

Therese of Avila, the most renowned ecstatic of the Catholic church, said that on several occasions while in rapture she had the feeling that her heart had been pierced by a seraph with a burning spear.

Perhaps Paul had a similar experience when he spoke about a thorn in the flesh.

Certainly the great apostle knew ecstasy. He was not sure if during prayer he had been in the body or not, and he spoke in unknown tongues. Once he was raptured to the third heaven.

Therese, Ignatius of Loyola, and Luther, all had the gift of tears in prayer, which is most valuable. The Kabbalah says, "If for a man all the gates of heaven are closed, there remains one *bab hadimoth*—the gate of tears."

At this point, every suggestion of barter vanishes from prayer. It is rather self-transcendence, as the individual becomes one in spirit with Him.

The Soviets made a film in honor of their dictator, the mass-murderer Andropov. In it they quoted what they considered the most important sentence of his diary: "Being is for a minute, non-being for ever."

Andropov closed for himself the road to eternal bliss by killing thousands of those who knew the way to obtain it.

The poor man had not known what union with God is. When a soul is united with God at the pinnacle of the prayer-temple, even God cannot make it cease to exist because it is consciously part of His Self.

Such souls no longer worship anyone else as God. There is no more duality. We are one with Him. As one cannot think in the supreme moments of ecstasy, not even about the beloved who gives this joy, there is no more thought or understanding of God. How can one understand the understanding of the universe?

In this stage the words of the German mystic Meister Eckhardt gets fulfilled: "The eye wherewith I see God is the same eye wherewith God sees me." (Works vol. 1 p. 478) At this stage you have no more the experience of the transcendent as an object but as a subject,

You are no more united with God but one.

Every expression of thought, of a desire, of a sentiment in words falsifies these in a measure, because an experience is changed into a structure of words. How much likeness is between the words "I love you" said to God and the fire of love burning in the heart with flames which have every second another shape?

Therefore some Christians recur of speaking in unknown tongues, as the adherents of Zen recur to anti-logic statements.

Silent prayer is pure oneness with God in which you lose even your best self, the one who has virtue, piety, yes you lose even God as your possession. There exists no more an individual to have God and a God to be had. In Hebrew even the word "to have" does not exist. There exists only One, who to those outside may appear as a He-me, but inside of whom this differentiation has ceased.

Jesus is called "the express image" of God. You become a clean mirror which reflects whatever comes without approval or disapproval.

The mirror shows with the same fidelity a flower, a bad man, a saint, a bird, a girl, a male. You let things come and go without judging. You have rebecome a child which does not know to distinguish.

Perfect silence reigns. "May God make His face shine upon you." (Numbers 6:25) This prayer got fulfilled. You look into His face and wonder. It is so much like yours. Really you have been made in His image and likeness. Apostle Thomas had the strange by name —

Dydimus, which means in Greek, twin. Whose twin was he? Is it that God's face and man's face in this stage look like faces of twins? You can almost confound them.

God is the truth. The Bible is the truth about the truth. Good theology is the truth about the truth about the truth. A good sermon is the truth about truth about the truth about the truth. Many scaffolds around a building! At a certain moment, the scaffolds get torn down and the building remains: God Himself one with us.

The Rumanian prince Bibescu was invited to visit a splendid castle of a French aristocrat. He showed the prince all the antiques and precious works of art his ancestors had gathered during centuries. The prince said in the end: "The castle itself is gorgeous. The ebauties gathered in it take away the eyes from the splendour of the castle itself."

Let God be just God. Don't add to Him attributes which are always qualities we attribute to Him. God Himself is obviously without attributes. There comes a moment when you don't attribute to Him even oneness with you. He is no more the object of your desires, love, faith. You are the subject. We have always difficult problems in trying to understand what and why He does. There is no answer to these problems. He does not have these problems and you become one with Him. He will have kissed you with the kisses of his mouth. What problems concern a bride when she receives the passionate embraces of her bridegroom?

Jeremiah said to God: "You have deceived me."

(20:7) In a sense every pre-school and primary school teacher "deceives" pupils by telling them fairy tales or telling them it is important to write orthographically. When the children grow up, they have to discard much of what they have been taught at an early age. God must also speak to us at the level of our capacity for understanding. There exist necessary religious fairy tales. They should all lead to the end-result: perfect unity with God.

Teilhard de Chardin wrote, "Thanks to the enormous event in physics, *i.e.*, the discovery of electromagnetic waves, every individual is at the same time (actively and passively) over continents and seas present in every place of the earth." We share something of God's omnipresence. Who can ever evict us from reality?

Non-Christian religions often have intimations of this oneness with God. It is written in the *Chandogya Upanishad*, "When one understands that the Self of all beings has arisen in himself, when one has experienced the oneness, where is there place for sorrow and confusion?"

In this union with God, sins are surely forgiven, because we have become one with those we have wronged. And further, there is no room for boasting about any good accomplishments.

Other exceptional events may occur in this state.

I personally knew a Jewish teacher in the town of Timishoara, Romania, who had no interest in the Christian religion. One day while walking down the street, she clearly saw a splendid crown floating before

her eyes. When she tried to grasp it, the crown eluded her.

Then this lady, who had always had a positivist philosophy, began at once to pursue the crown, which remained constantly out of reach. From one street to another she continued the chase, till finally the crown entered a courtyard and then a room where several brethren were gathered in prayer.

Surprised at the sudden visit, they learned about the vision and were able to explain to the teacher that she had seen rightly and had been properly guided. There was a real crown to be had. As a result of this experience, she accepted Jesus as her Messiah.

Rabbi Akibe died a martyr's death under the Emperor Hadrian. While being tortured, he said the evening prayer. Surprised, the torturer asked, "How can you say prayers while being tortured?"

He replied simply, "My whole life I have been sad that I had never fulfilled the commandment to love God with all my heart and all my soul. Now I am happy to know that I fulfill the commandment because I can pray while being tortured to death."

Martyr deaths are a rare exception. But a martyr's spirit should be common among the people of God.

I was impressed to read about a Tibetan monastery that the Chinese Communists penetrated while the monks were at meditation. When they cut off the head of one monk with sword, the other did not tum his head but continued in his spiritual exercise. (How unlike Western prayer so often interrupted by the telephone!)

In proper prayer, one would not feel a knife thrust into his body. I have known Christians who during Communist tortures entered into a higher sphere of prayer. Sometimes they simply did not feel the pain; at other times they could bear it without breaking.

Many churches are full of prayer, because those prayers did not ascend to heaven. They did not express ardent love.

During World War II, monks were gathered in an Italian church for the ritual prayer. At once the alarm was given. American planes threw bombs. Then the abbot said: "Let us stop the prayers and let us begin to pray."

The many prayers must lead us to the one real prayer, the many cultic acts to the cult without cult, to what Jesus called "worship in spirit and in truth". Its highest form is "praying in the Holy Spirit," (Jude 20) which is silent, "with groanings which cannot be uttered." (Romans 8:26)

During years I was in solitary confinement under the Communists, we were very hungry and also doped with drugs which should destroy our minds. We lost the sense of time, being kept in an underground dungeon in which we never saw sun, moon, stars, trees or flowers. Perfect silence reigned. We never heard a voice or whisper.

Because of all this, we forgot more and more. In time, I forgot all books I had ever read and also the books which I had written. One evening, I vaguely remembered that I was a Lutheran pastor. I could not remember, though, who Luther was. I made a big discovery that night -- that one can be a Christian

without knowing about Luther. People went to heaven during fifteen centuries without Luther.

One night I tried to pray but my mind did not work anymore. I could not formulate thoughts. Then I said, "I will recite the Lord's prayer". I said alright "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name, thy kingdom come, Thy..." I did not know the continuation of the prayer.

I was dismayed for a moment, but quietened down soon. I had forgotten the prayer but I knew what prayer I had forgotten -- one which starts with the assertion that the Being who rules in heaven is my Father. What does it count then that I don't know the exact formula?

I folded my hands and said "Our Father which art in heaven. I have forgotten the prayer, but you know it by heart by now. You have heard it so many millions of time. I tell you so much: I love you."

For a long time after this, my only prayer was "Father, I love you, Jesus I love you." This was all.

But the hunger and the doping and the torture continued. It became too difficult to say even the four words "Jesus, I love you." I was so weak I could not stretch out my hand to take from the table a cup of water which was near me. All words of prayer ceased for a long time. My only prayer was the quiet beating of a heart which loved. I still believe this to be a high form of prayer.

Words are not absolutely needed in prayer. There exists the prayer in the Holy Spirit, the silent prayer. There exists also the prayer of the conscious about

which our conscious part does not know, except when it surprises the unconscious sometimes or analyses it.

In the solitary cell I fell deadly sick, with osseous and backbone tuberculosis, which gives very great pains. I had pus all over. The pain awoke me twenty-thirty times a night, which made me surprise my dreams. I became a good knower of the dream life.

Consciously, I scarcely ever prayed. My mind did not work. But I saw with wonder how much I prayed in dreams. Then and even now during my dreams I am often in churches and take holy communion.

Others had similar experiences. A Christian in Los Angeles who was not even sick, said loudly during his sleep, "I thank Thee God, that the death of Your saints is precious in your sight. You do not wish the death of sinners but that they should return. I return to Thee." His wife listened and wondered. Next morning, he knew nothing of what he had said in dream. It was a typical prayer in the spirit. Next morning he also died suddenly, without history of sickness.

Surely such occasions are rare. Normally we have to use our lips in prayer and to be insistent in our demands. Perseverance is needed. God does not always give immediately what we ask because we do not value things easily obtained. To know music one has to work under discipline for many years. So it is with prayer.

### **Parables about Prayer**

"Jesus spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart."

In it He made a daring comparison between God and an unjust judge, who in one instance behaved righteously not because of his conscience—his conscience did not work—but because he wanted to lead an easy life. He rendered justice to a woman only because she troubled his quiet.

In this parable, Jesus teaches us to pester God in prayer as one might pester an unjust judge. He concludes with this assurance: "Shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? (Luke 18:7) (There exists not only the peak of prayer, silent as the Himalayan peaks, but also the difficult ascension.)

There is a basic conflict between impatient man and God who works with great spans of time. In this conflict, the Son of God, having become man, is on our side.

He does not say we are in a hurry but that God bears with injustice too long. It is not always a virtue to be patient. He Himself enters heaven with His blood, to hasten the coming of justice for us.

Somehow we feel the obligation to defend God when He is attacked or criticized. Not so Jesus.

In the relationship between God and man, the one to bear the guilt in conflicts is always the wisest, the strongest, the most cultured, since the most is asked of him who has most. Who has more than God? Therefore, He gladly takes the guilt upon Himself. In the Hebrew of Exodus 34:7, God calls Himself *nose avon*, "the bearer of guilt." ("To bear" and "to forgive" guilt is the same expression)

Jesus' parable seems to concern only prayer, but it provokes a chain of thought that leads one to fight against evil and injustice. We must not always bear with injustice, but urge heaven to intervene and then attempt to eliminate it ourselves.

Jesus approves of our crying day and night to God, but we need to interrupt our cries from time to time to help the cause.

We will always have unjust judges if we are content to accept them as God's punishment and only cry to God against them. Such a docile religion would be an opiate for the people indeed. We have to pray but also to work and to fight. Jesus, in a parable about prayer, makes us aware of the oppression of unrighteous authorities.

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Jesus also tells us that God "bears long." But why does He fulfill our prayers tomorrow and not today?

We give unique names to variable entities. We give names like "man," "river," "weather" to things that change constantly. Neither the man nor the river nor the weather is the same today as yesterday. God, on the other hand, is always loving and righteous. In this regard He is without change, but He is also a living God, and life means dynamism, evolution and development.

Just read the Bible from beginning to end and you will see tremendous changes in the Godhead. Prayer is one of the determining factors in this development.

Currents in the river play a role in the movement of

a ship, but it is also true that waves produced by the moving ship alter the flow of water in the river. God determines our life, but our life, and especially our prayers, are factors that move the hand of God.

An active God must enter into relationships with men, influencing them and being influenced by them. It might take long for our influence to be effective. This may be one of the reasons why so much time elapses between our prayers and their fulfillment. We must persevere.

Jesus says, "He bears long." He does not fulfill prayer immediately. And during this time we suffer.

If He is late in doing what we desire, then we must persist and pray without ceasing. We have the promise: "He will avenge His elect."

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The word "avenge" here might not be the best translation. The Greek word *adikeo* means "to make full justice."

We have the assurance that God will provide justice as a result of our prayers. Our only concern is that justice be on our side.

How? To make full justice means to give to everyone his due. This cannot be done in a world full of exploitation. The whale can exercise its right to live only by taking this right from the big fish, who, in their turn, takes away the right to live from the smaller fish. So it is among men.

But God will make full justice by accomplishing our

prayers uttered for thousands of years. He will make His Kingdom come, in which mankind will not be divided into nations, classes, parties, religions, in which there will be harmony among His people, in which nature will be released from the tyranny of the strong over the weak.

To advance toward the establishment of this kingdom, we must have faith. Therefore Jesus asks with anxiety, "When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"

"Lord, give us faith" should be one of our main prayers.

The original Greek is different from our English translation, where we read, "Will He find faith" of whatever kind. In Greek the substantive has the definite article. It is *the* faith, the *one* faith, that counts. Not every kind of faith will do.

\* \* \*

In Luke 18, Jesus tells another parable.

He speaks about two men who went up to the temple to pray—or rather about two categories of men. Actually, we might go even further and say two aspects of one individual, since there is the outer man and the hidden man of the heart. As often as each of us enters the temple, both pray.

What a sinful in us repents and says, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." My sinfulness is not a hindrance to spiritual growth but rather my pharisaical self-righteousness, my consciousness of having done good, of

fasting often and paying tithe, of not being like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, crooks.

People do not realize that God loves a sinner who repents more than a righteous man who boasts. Even if one has done well and has fulfilled the whole law, he should not praise himself but rather be humble and recognize his faults. John Chrysostom said, "Pride is the cause of all evils."

To weep over your virtues is more important than to weep over your sins. At the foot of the cross, one realizes that his virtues are without value.

Boasting about your Christian virtues is atheism masked in Christianity. Anti-religious and anti-clerical atheism arose as a protest against atheism clad in piety. Therefore Luther said, "God would rather bear with the curses of atheists than with the hallelujahs of false believers."

The Pharisee prayed by boasting about himself. He pictured himself as better than other men. Jesus abhors such a prayer. Pride may seem only a defect to us, but to Jesus it is a mortal sin.

The Pharisee had really done good deeds, but with his mouth he erred. Pride can be very subtle; there is an abyss of pride in all of us. In prayer we should express love for the fallen; we should not slander them. We should avoid boasting in prayer about the good we have done.

Those of insight, unlike the Pharisee, prefer to boast of the fact that their sins are forgiven by a merciful God. Others—what a wonder!—boast of the many sins they

have committed and of which they did God the favor of repenting.

The publican's prayer, "God be merciful to me a sinner," is a very good one.

In prayer we must have the spirit of humility, acknowledging our sinfulness before God. We must be conscious that condemnation and death might be near, that we have nowhere to hide. With this thought in mind, we should pray, "Lord, have mercy! Tear up the sentence against me."

What is the best place for prayer? It is before the court of God knowing that He will now pronounce the sentence.

\* \* \*

The Greek word for "have mercy" is *hilastheti*, which comes from *hilasterion*, "the mercy seat." In the Jewish temple was the ark of the covenant, a sort of box containing the two tablets of the Ten Commandment law received by Moses from God. Above it was a lid called the "mercy seat," which symbolized the passing from death to life. It in turn was overarched by two cherubim. God's shekinah glory appeared to the high priest between the cherubim.

Translated into images, the words of the publican meant, "Make me a mercy seat, a place where values change. May I have a part in what takes place on the altar. May I pass from death to resurrection."

The publican accused himself with a broken heart. Without sorrow for sin no one gets rid of it. He was now

a man beloved by God. Every man who is righteous before God first presented himself with repentance as a sinner.

Jesus teaches us to humble ourselves in prayer because he "who humbles himself will be exalted." If you cannot humble yourself, regret for lacking humility will suffice. If you have no love, then cultivate a love for love and yearn for it. This will do too.

This parable illustrates our relationship with God. Before God, the humble publican's prayer is accepted, but not the Pharisee's.

However, we should leave the judging to God. It would be terrible if the accepted publicans began to despise the rejected Pharisees.

In our dealings with others, we should remember the role that heredity and circumstances play in shaping the character of a man. Just as a physician treats all his patients with equal concern, so Christians should treat everyone with love, leaving the ultimate decision to God.

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There are beautiful models of prayer outside of Scripture that one can use in his striving toward the highest. Here are two by Francis of Assisi:

"O most high, almighty, good Lord God, to Thee belong praise, glory, honor, and all blessing!

"Praised be my Lord God with all His creatures, and specially our brother the sun, who brings us the day and who brings us the light; fair is he and shines with a very

great splendor: O Lord, he signifies to us Thee!

“Praised be my Lord for our sister the moon, and for the stars, the which He has set clear and lovely in heaven.

“Praised be my Lord for our brother the wind, and for the air and cloud, calms and all weather by the which Thou upholdest life in all creatures.

“Praised be my Lord for our sister water, who is very serviceable unto us and humble and precious and clean.

“Praised be my Lord for our brother fire, through whom Thou givest us light in the darkness; and he is bright and pleasant and very mighty and strong.

“Praised be my Lord for our mother the earth, the which doth sustain us and keep us, and bringeth forth diverse fruits and flowers of many colors, and grass.

“Praise be my Lord for all those who pardon one another for His love’s sake, and who endure weakness and tribulation; blessed are they who peaceably shall endure, for Thou; O most High, shalt give them a crown.

“Praised be my Lord for our sister, the death of the body, from which no man escapeth. Woe to him who dieth in mortal sin! Blessed are they who are found walking by Thy most holy will, for the second death shall have no power to do them harm.

“Praise ye and bless the Lord, and give thanks unto Him and serve Him with great humility.”

St. Francis’ next prayer has achieved well-deserved fame for its practical beauty:

“Lord, make me the instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, may I bring love;

Where there is malice, pardon;  
Where there is discord, harmony;  
Where there is error, truth;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, Your light;  
Where there is sadness, may I bring joy.  
Oh, Master, may I seek not so much  
To be comforted as to comfort;  
To be understood as to understand;  
To be loved as to love,  
For it is in giving that we receive.  
It is in losing our lives that we shall find them.  
It is in forgiving that we shall be forgiven.  
It is in dying that we shall rise up to eternal life.”  
Let us learn from other famous prayers as well:

Therese of Avila: “God, may nothing confuse and nothing frighten me. May I realize that while everything passes, You do not change. May I practice patience which obtains everything. Having Thee, I will lack nothing. You alone are sufficient.”

Cromwell: “Though I am a bad and miserable creature, I am in covenant with You through grace. I come to You for Your people. God, whatever You do with me, do them good.”

We find a deep prayer in the Hindu *Bridharanyaka-Upanishad*:

“From the unreal bring me to the real,  
From darkness lead me to light’  
From death lead me to immortality.”

The Apostle Paul wrote a beautiful prayer in his letter to the Colossians (1:9-13):

“For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may have a walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and long suffering with joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light.”

“He has delivered us from the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love.”

A prayer of Thomas A Kempis: “Lord, if You wish me to be in darkness, be blessed; and if You wish that I be in the light, again be blessed. Be blessed if You wish to comfort; be equally blessed if You wish me to pass through tribulations.”

We read in the Kabbalistic book *Zohar*, “He who loves the king does not serve him for a fee.”

Rabia, an eighth century Moslem mystic, said, “If I worship thee from fear of hell, burn me in hell. If I worship thee from hope of paradise, exclude me thence. But if I worship thee for thine own sake, then withhold not from me thine eternal beauty.”

Therese of Avila kept Jesus company by praying His prayer in Gethsemane (Luke 22:42): “Father, if it is Your will, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will,

but Yours, be done.”

Eleanor Roosevelt kept the following prayer of an unknown author in her purse: “Our Father, who has set a restlessness in our hearts and made us all seekers after that which we can never fully find, keep us at tasks too hard for us, that we may be driven to Thee for strength.”

We will pray to the Lord according to His righteousness, which might cause Him to condemn us, and not according to His goodness. We should be like clay in the hands of the potter. St. Therese of Lisieux said we should be like toys that He plays with when He likes and sets aside when He likes.

Again, like David in Psalm 63:7, we will praise God for help in the past, though none seems forthcoming now. We will celebrate His loving kindness regardless of how He seems to regard us at the moment.

At the tomb of His friend Lazarus, Jesus thanked the Father for having fulfilled a prayer of His before He had even formulated it. (John 11:41) It is God’s good pleasure to fulfill exactly what Jesus or a man imbued with His spirit even vaguely desires, perhaps what he has not yet formulated in His thinking. God in His graciousness says, “Before they call, I will answer” (Isaiah 65:24), for He works in us “both to will and to do for His good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:13)

We can ask for whatever we desire and God will not contravene our requests.

\* \* \*

The expression “praying in the spirit” has also an

implication more down to earth. The word "spirit" comes from a Latin root which means "to breathe."

Thomas Merton wrote, "How I pray depends upon how I breathe."

God breathed into Adam the spirit of life. Jesus breathed on His apostles the Holy Spirit.

The New Testament in its original Greek cannot be read without knowing the right breathing.

The Greek had no "h." Therefore one could not write "Jehovah." The breathing sign took its place. To write and read Greek correctly, one must be attentive to the sign for smooth and for rough breathing. If one reads the Lord's Prayer in Greek, he must be attentive to the breathing signs.

The words "Jesus," "Jerusalem," and "Adam" are all written with a sign of smooth breathing on the first letter.

In preparation for prayer, or even for thinking about truth, we should slow down our breathing and inhale deeply. This requires the use of the diaphragm for inflating the lungs. Deep, rhythmical breathing has the effect of concentrating the attention.

St. John Climacus, a seventh century monk of Mt. Sinai, said, "When you unite the memory of Jesus through your breathing, then you will discover the incomparable value of *hesychia*." This is a Greek word for interior tranquility and openness to truth while one is attentive to the divine presence.

Constant prayer is a reminder of the necessity to expand the lungs. The Hindu Yogis also taught that

measured breathing helps one obtain truth.

In the last century, the quantity of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere of our planet has increased by 16 to 18 percent. Of the carbon dioxide produced by human beings, 53 percent remains in the atmosphere, while the rest is absorbed by the ocean. In the next twenty years or so, its concentration in the air will increase greatly—perhaps by 25 to 50 percent. Good breathing will become well-nigh impossible. Even now it is difficult in many places.

A garden or any other place with fresh air is the best place for prayer.

But some pray in a concentration camp barracks with two hundred people in one room. There is ceaseless noise: swearing, singing of obscene songs, quarreling, useless or stupid talk. These should not be a hindrance to fervent prayer. On the contrary, you can say to yourself, "Look with what fervor these people say wicked things all day long. Should I not be just as fervent about conversing properly with my Creator?"

\* \* \*

What about the time between prayers? There is no such time. Real Christians pray without ceasing, as Paul enjoined.

A man who went to a hermit said as he left, "Forgive me, please, for disturbing you in prayer."

The hermit answered, "My prayer is to give you peace and to go with you in love."

One need not kneel formally to pray. A woman can

pray while cooking at the kitchen stove.

When Rabbi Elimelech was on his deathbed and was asked to eat, he said, "I wish only what I ate once with my brother Susia in the small restaurant with the red roof, on the other side of the Mver Dnjestr."

After his death, his son was anxious to find the restaurant and learn about his father's visit there. When he asked for food, the hostess said, "We are poor and have just a noodle soup for peasants."

The son said, "That's all right. Please make it for me." When he had tasted, he liked it so much he asked for a second and third dish. Finally he asked, "What have you put in the soup to make it so delicious?"

The hostess replied, "We have added nothing to it. If it is the taste, then it must be from paradise." She said that several years ago two men had come to her restaurant, and she had nothing but noodle soup. So she prayed to God while cooking, "I have nothing else besides this noodle soup. Please give to your servants a few of the herbs of paradise." When her guests ate the soup they could never get enough of it and said it tasted like heavenly food. Today too I prayed as I did then."

There exists, then, a continuous prayerful state of mind as well as formal prayer.

It is good to take someone with you when you desire to obtain something from Jesus.

Some Greeks expressed a desire to the apostle Philip. Philip shared it with Andrew, and they both told Jesus.

Collective prayer on the part of the church has its

place, but it is important to have fellowship in prayer with unrighteous persons as well. Just as a wet log between dry ones in a stove will bum, so the hearts of unbelievers can be kindled by the ardent prayers of those who surround them.

\* \* \*

During prayer, whether private or public, an individual should be aware that he is addressing his *heavenly* Father. He is having an audience with the King.

Like the Englishman who dons his dinner jacket in the wilds, Haydn never sat down to compose music except in his best suit and wig, while for important works he wore a ring given to him by the king of Prussia. Christians should be no less concerned about decency and propriety when they attend a religious service, which invited God's presence on earth and proclaims Christ's victory over death and the devil.

It is also good to dress acceptably before praying—supposing you have the wherewithal to dress. I have seen African Christians who do not own even a decent shirt.

In a time of calamity Hezekiah, the righteous king, "tore his clothes, covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the Lord." (II Kings 16:1) Don't dress like for a ball when you wish to tell God your sorrows.

It is good to read the Bible before praying—but this supposes that you know how to read, that the Bible has been translated into your language, that you are not too

poor to afford one, that you do not live under a tyranny that forbids ownership of a Bible.

Probably sixty percent of Christians in the world lack even the possibility of reading a Bible, for one reason or another. Still, they can worship acceptably without it.

I began my life of prayer from the first day I knew about Jesus, long before reading the Bible. I worshiped for fourteen years in Communist jails without ever seeing a Bible, in the midst of constant squalor and squabbling. The Lithuanian Christian Petkus has been in this situation for thirty-two years. The Russian Orthodox monk Alexei Kotov for 45 years.

\* \* \*

Some pray best when in a state of conscious immobility. People of the Far East have attained a degree of virtuosity in such positions.

The prayer of Orthodox Christians is accompanied by many prostrations. (Jesus Himself prayed prostrate.) With the Hassidic Jews, prayer without motion of the body is inconceivable. One cannot legislate in these matters. It is important only that a person chooses what best enables him to concentrate.

Christians from time immemorial have had the custom of signing themselves at prayer with the sign of the cross. Protestants forsook this habit not because it was wrong, but because Catholics overdid it. Luther himself retained the habit.

It is sad that only out of a spirit of antagonism and as protest against an overload of ceremonies Protes-

tantism abandoned some very good practices.

\* \* \*

The center of the religious service for Evangelicals is the sermon. Obviously every sermon must be steeped in prayer, just like any book written by a Christian author. But there is more to a service than a sermon.

The Scripture says that incense should be offered with prayer. (Revelation 8:3) Men react variously in different circumstances. One does not have the same thoughts in a garden of roses as in an overcrowded prison cell full of the stench of human sweat and excrement. Experience indicates that God was right when He recommended in both the Old and New Testaments the use of incense in public worship. It predisposes to an uplifting of the soul.

Goethe commented, "Every church service which is not beautiful is idolatrous."

The history of why only the Orthodox church flourished in Russia is significant.

In the tenth century, Prince Vladimir sent ten envoys to travel throughout many countries to study the religions of their people exhaustively in order to find one suitable for Ukrainians and Russians. When at long last they found themselves in the Cathedral of St. Sophia in Byzantium, they were deeply moved by the beauty of the Divine Service. Upon their return to Ukraine, they reported to the Prince that when they had ended that Divine Service with the Greeks, they were unable to tell whether they were on earth or in heaven.

Many Protestants who have attended Orthodox services have left with the same impression—that they had been close to heaven. Why must services be dull and colorless?

This surely does not demean the value of services in poor and abject circumstances, such as in jail, or in a simple undecorated hall. Only the temple of Jerusalem was beautiful; the synagogues in little towns were not. But the knowledge of the one great sanctuary uplifted the people.

\* \* \*

What about written prayers said privately from a prayer book or read or chanted in a church?

Many of them are of high value. Their authors are great men of God. The prayer chanted by the Orthodox called *Trisagion*—“Holy God, strong God, immortal God, have mercy on us”—repeated thrice is attributed to the apostle James; others to ancient church fathers like John Chrysostom or Basil the Great; still others to more recent divines.

They can be useful and valuable. But it is good practice not to rely on pre-fabricated prayers as politicians do on speechwriters. They speak about patriotism but cannot look their compatriots in the eye to inspire them because they have to read from a manuscript what another has written about what should burn in their own hearts.

In prayer, then, it is not good to rely exclusively on what prayer-smiths have composed. The prayers you

formulate yourself might not be as exquisite or dogmatically conceived as those in the prayer book, but God likes amateurs as well as professionals. An amateur, literally, is one who loves.

A young man who was in love bought a book containing samples of love letters and declared his sentiments to his beloved by copying those words. They were beautiful, and the girl was impressed. So it happened that one evening while they were alone in a garden sitting on a bench, she stretched out her hands toward him. But he had his hands in his pockets searching for the book in order to read her the next page.

Scripture says that when the bride is with the Bridegroom, they commune in tongues unknown to those who are not privileged to spend such intimate hours with the Beloved. In moments of close communion written prayers are of little avail.

I think it can be dangerous to recite in prayer the thoughts of others, except the prayers of our Lord, which we appropriate to ourselves.

\* \* \*

In some denominations, church buildings contain images of wood and stone before which people bow. Protestants do not believe in such images or icons, but that does not mean they have no images. They worship with the best possible images of God before them—the brethren and sisters around them, especially their pastor.

If Catholics and Orthodox pay respect to represen-

tations in wood, then how much more should due respect be paid during worship to their church family! Through each individual member God makes His face shine upon us. Worship in which the worshipers are indifferent to each other does not deserve the name.

It is an ancient custom among the Jews to pray with their faces toward Jerusalem. Orthodox churches have the altar in the direction of Jerusalem, just as Moslems always bow toward Mecca.

The Law of Moses required that all sacrifices be offered in the place where the Lord should choose to put His name. (Deuteronomy 12:5,6) David says, "In thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple." (Psalm 5:7 and 138:2) And again: "I lift up my hands toward thy holy oracle." (Psalm 28:2) It would be quite acceptable to pray even now with this in mind.

Some use beads in prayer so that they can count how many have been said. There is a danger, though, in counting prayers.

It is said that a Christian once put nuts into a vase every time he said a prayer so that he might know exactly how many times he prayed. When the vase was full, he heard a voice say, "Crack open the nuts. Only the good nuts will tell you how many of your prayers have been answered." When he cracked them open, he found that one had a good kernel.

It is not important how many prayers you say, but how good they are. And to be good, a prayer must be in the spirit.

\* \* \*

It is proper to make vows to God, but they should be taken seriously. When Jacob was a fugitive from his brother, he promised that if everything went well with him he would surely give to God a tithe of his income. He became a great Bible personality.

Two Jews were stranded in a lifeboat. Not a ship was in sight, and they had no idea how far they were from land. One Jew said, "God, if You save us, I will give half of my possessions to the synagogue." Then, after a few hours of useless rowing, "I'll give two thirds." After a few hours more, he said, "I'll give—"

Don't promise any more," interrupted the other. "I can see land."

We must remember our vows when we reach land and give what we have vowed. A person who does not pay his vows will discover his prayers are unheeded.

\* \* \*

Some common practices in private and public prayer can simply be discarded.

The Buddhists tell jokingly about the abbot of a monastery centuries ago who had a cat that disturbed his prayers. So he always bound it before he worshiped. After the cat died and the abbot too, the habit was perpetuated. In that monastery a cat is always tied before the religious service.

A personal example may serve to illustrate the foolishness of some practices. Because my feet ache, I find it difficult to kneel. Some who respect me have come to believe that the manner in which I sit on the floor

is the best position for prayer!

The apostle John, who wrote five books of the Bible, wanted Christians to understand one thing that he formulated in a single sentence: "You have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. *I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it.*" (I John 2: 20,21)

A man in India who lived at a time when water was scarce, sold river-water, asking good money for it. Great crowds bought from him, calling him a benefactor, until one day another man said, "But the water comes from this river, right here! Why pay money for it? We can fetch it for ourselves."

The man said, "The whole purpose of my commerce was to make you see what has always been right under your eyes."

We should participate in public worship and use every modality with the idea in mind that the ultimate purpose is to send us into the intimate embrace of Jesus, where we will receive His holy kiss. The main purpose in all the para-phernun of common worship is to make you know He is at hand.

An eagle's egg was once hatched in a chicken yard by a henhouse. The eaglet grew up as a hen, never realizing that great birds soaring on high were its kin.

We who are the bride of Christ have the divine nature and soar toward the heights, to an encounter with our heavenly Bridegroom.

\* \* \*

Let us return to the question with which we started: Should one pray for God?

I surely pray for a person when I pray that he may succeed in business, that he may have credit, that his word may be accepted.

St. Paul tells us, "Brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course and be glorified. (II Thessalonians 3:1) We are supposed to pray that God's word might be propagated and appreciated.

It is tantamount to praying for a king when we pray for the well-being of his capital. We are told to pray for Jerusalem which is His city. (Matthew 5:35) We are called upon to pray for Israel, which is the apple of God's eyes. (Zechariah 2:8) We surely pray for someone when we pray of his eyesight.

There is a segment of humanity that deserves primary concern in every prayer: the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick, and the prisoners.

All Christians should pray for these people. Jesus said explicitly that we will discover on the Day of Judgement that we have prayed for the Son of God because it was He who appeared to us in these different guises. (Matthew 25:40)

Let us pray boldly for God who suffers in mankind.

The prayer of the church is, "Come, Lord Jesus." (Revelation 22:20) Do we ask Him to come primarily for our benefit or because His coming to us will mean unspeakable joy for Himself? I call Him that He might have full pleasure. I pray to Him for Him.

I wonder that no one has written this before.

God said to the prophet, "Lift up your voice like a trumpet." (Isaiah 58:1) A trumpet does not lift up any voice unless someone blows into it. Who blows in us the words of prayer? It is the Holy Spirit, who is God. He prays to the Father as Jesus did during His earthly life and still does. Prayer is also an intra-Trinitarian event.

God the Spirit prays in us through Jesus to God the Father, but also *for* Him.

The Christian purpose in prayer is not to get from God, but to give Him all joy.

St. Therese of Lisieux said, "It is for us to console our Lord, and not for Him to console us. His heart is so tender that if you cry, He will dry your tears. But thereafter He will go away sad, since you did not suffer Him to repose with tranquility within you. Our Lord loves the glad of heart, the children that greet Him with a smile. When will you learn to hide your troubles from Him or to tell Him gaily that you are glad to suffer for Him?"

When St. Therese got up in the morning, she would put the crucifix on her pillow while she dressed and say, "My Jesus, You have toiled and wept enough in Your three and thirty years on this miserable earth. Rest You, today! It is my turn to suffer and fight." "Let us give our Lord pleasure. Let us by self-sacrifice give Him souls!"

St. Therese once reproached a nun for complaining so much about her troubles to her sisters. The nun answered, "You are right. Such was my own thought. Henceforth my tears will be for God alone. I shall confide my worries to one who will understand and

console me.” To which St. Therese replied, “Tears for God! That must not be! Far less to Him than to His creatures ought you to show a mournful face.”

“Let us give our Lord pleasure,” she says. He is a living Being who, like His creatures, seeks pleasure. God shouted with a voice of utter joy, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17)

His pleasures are not always the same as ours. He finds pleasure in sacrificing what He holds dearest. It is written in Isaiah 53 that it pleased the Lord to bruise the Messiah—but He knew what glorification would follow.

Let us give Him pleasure, speaking to Him in words of praise. Let us give Him pleasure by praying that all creatures should bless Him.

David says to God, “Your saints shall bless You.” (Psalm 145:10) The supposition is that He needs our blessings, just as we need His.

But we must be very careful that our blessings are not cursed, as some men’s are. (Malachi 2:2) Hands that bless must be very pure.

They must be hands of men who have not only cried to God for forgiveness of sins but have also turned from them; who, aware that there exists vain worship of those who are outside God’s truth.

Dante says in *“The Purgatory”* “If I am not helped by a prayer from a heart full of grace, what good would a prayer not accepted in heaven do to me?”

A heart full of grace fulfils the expectation which Jesus had when He said “Ye are gods”. A god will have prayed to God for the One God with whom He is one.

I hope you will not have understood this last sentence. How can one who understands (who stands under, on a much lower level) understand the superior? Stand with Him, rise to His level and you will know.

## **PRAYER INDEED**

One "Our Father" uttered with faith helps more than a sleeping pill, a board meeting, or a long debate. I said on purpose "one 'Our Father' said with faith." I learned from Bradley, an English martyr: "When you pray to God, pray until you pray really to God; when you sing to God, sing until you sing really to God; and when you have fellowship with Him don't be satisfied with anything less than fellowship with Him."

Prayer should always be said with trust, which leads to cessation of thought. We realize in praying that we often think in narrow categories. Who can define with precision finiteness and infiniteness, absolute and relative, or even right and wrong? These are labels we tie on the different aspects of one reality. In prayer we have a glimpse of the whole of it and then say, "Thy will be done."

Some pray in the Orthodox manner, which was explained by St. Cosmas of Aitolia:

"You know that in the heavens, the angels glorify the Blessed Trinity. Since you cannot go up into heaven to worship there, you join the three fingers of your hand (the thumb, digit and index finger) and bring your hand to your head, symbolizing heaven, and say: 'Just as in heaven the angels glorify the Blessed Trinity, I, His

servant also serve and adore Him.”

“Bringing down your hand to your breast, say: ‘I adore You and I serve You, O Lord—You who, because of my sins, became incarnate in the womb of the mother of God.’ ”

“Then, carrying the hand to your right shoulder, say, ‘I beg You, my God, to forgive me and to place me on Your right with the just.’ ”

“Then to the left shoulder saying: ‘I implore You, O Lord, do not count me amongst the rejected ones at Your left.’ ”

“Bending toward the ground (i.e., making a prostration) say: ‘I glorify You, my God, I adore You and I serve You. Like You, I will descend into the grave.’ Raising (yourself) up, recall that this (action) symbolizes the Resurrection and say: ‘I glorify You and I adore You, O Lord, for You resurrected (Yourself) from the dead in order to give us eternal life.’ ”

This is not the only way to pray. Francis of Assisi passed whole nights repeating, “*Dio mio i toto mio*—My God and my all.” Find the kind of prayer that is the most congenial to you and then make it one of the main constituents of your life. Gandhi was shot on the way to prayer. Livingstone died while praying.

Prayer is *the* most important occupation. Among all the works in which we engage, it is the one that produces the greatest results. Spiritual growth is ensured not so much by reading the Bible and other Christian books or by listening to sermons as through meditating, through praying over what you have read and heard. Prayer will

help you associate yourself with your loftiest thoughts when you read. Prayer will help you not only to have right principles, but to love them.

Make sure that what you call "prayer" is indeed prayer. So often we go to God to give instructions rather than to receive information and advice. We tell Jesus what we want from Him. Instead, He expects us to listen to His voice.

Once you have heard it, don't feel obliged to respond with holy phrases unless they correspond to the state of your heart. Give expression in prayer to everything that is in you, including your folly. Would you not show your folly to a psychiatrist? Then why not to God, your Father?

Holy phrases, what we usually think of as prayer, might not be suitable in your specific circumstances. A man sentenced to death said the "Our Father" before being executed. He stopped at the words "Give us this day our daily bread." Of what use were these words?

Be very careful about what you say in prayer. Would you agree with its fulfillment? We say with an easy heart, "Your kingdom come." Do you know what the day of the Lord is like, the day of His coming? The prophet Zephaniah, describing it, says "The mighty man shall cry bitterly. That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness." (Zephaniah 1:14-17)

Personally, before saying "Thy kingdom come," I would be very frank with God and would ask that the

terms on which He promises to come be changed. There are precedents for God changing His mind. God had given a law regarding inheritance. The daughters of a certain Zelophehad told Moses they did not agree with this law of God, which excluded girls from being heirs, thus threatening their family with extinction. Moses explained to God the arguments of the girls. God answered simply, "The daughters of Zelophehad are right," instead of saying, "I am right and I am God, and I will not alter my decrees because some girls wet behind their ears say so." The decree was abolished. (Numbers 27:1-7) This could also happen to what God decreed through His prophet Zephaniah.

Christians pray in the name of Jesus, who is our Mediator between God and man. A mediator never belongs to only one side. He is the middleman for both sides, the ombudsman, the go-between.

"Thy will be done" is not the only prayer. Resignation is not necessarily a Christian virtue. When Moses pleaded for the Children of Israel after God threatened to annihilate them, God relented. There is a time to plead that God's will be changed.

When Mordecai knew that his enemies wanted to destroy the Jewish people, "He rent his clothes and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter voice." (Esther 4:1) Do, the same! You might hear, like the Canaanite woman, "Be it unto thee even as *you* will." (Matthew 15:28) This is just the contrary of "Thy will be done." In the right spirit it is legitimate.

Prayer need not be only acquiescence then to God's will: Jesus prayed that the cup ordained by the Father be taken away from Him, though He added, "Nevertheless, not what I will, but what thou wilt." (Mark 14:36) He would not have squandered His energy in prayer if nothing could be achieved by it. There exists some possibility, sometimes very slight but still very real, that His will need not be fulfilled.

I don't believe that many words are needed in prayer. The supreme prayer is a simple statement of fact like the prayer of Mary, Jesus' mother, "They have no wine" (John 2:3), or that of Lazarus' sisters, "Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick." (John 11:3) We too can simply state our mood, our desire, our ardent wish. We tell Him the psychological and spiritual facts of our life.

Obviously, we cannot expect the Lord to do everything we demand. So many individuals appeal to Him, and with contradictory requests. The Talmud says that when the Jewish high priest entered the most holy place once a year, he finished his prayer for the people with the words, "God, don't listen to the requests of travelers." Everyone who travels on Sunday asks that it not rain; likewise, all those who travel on the other days of the week. If God answered all prayers, the country might suffer a continuous drought. The promise that whatever we ask of Him He will give to us refers to the collective prayer of the church universal, not to our individual demands.

In time, you will attain to the prayer of a pure mind

without sense data. Nothing of what is around and inside will count. You will know a form of prayer about which the Bible says nothing because it cannot be put in words. It does not consist of words. It is the quiet beating of the heart that loves Him. The ultimate aim of prayer will have been fulfilled. Prayer ceases, because the bride has united with the Bridegroom. But don't be impatient for this. "Stir not up, nor awake my love until He please." (Song of Solomon 2:7)

**My grandson Alex,  
when six, gave grace at a meal.  
"God, I thank you for this food.  
Please, give food also to all the hungry.  
Feed also George Washington  
and General Eisenhower.  
And, first of all take good care of Yourself,  
because if something happens to You,  
we will all be in big trouble."**