

# CHRISTIAN PRAYER: *raising the heart and mind to God*

(Catechism of the Catholic Church 2558-2758)

## Introduction

These pages are not meant to be a definition of prayer or a definitive description of how to pray. There is no single recipe for prayer, which, provided you and I follow it assiduously, always delivers the product: prayer is the expression of your soul in its relationship with God and so you can't be tied too closely to recipes or to formulae when it comes to prayer. Prayer reflects *who you are in relationship with God* - in St. John Damascene's classic description, prayer is "*the raising of one's mind and heart to God*" (*De fide orth.* 3,24). What he is saying is that prayer is the moment when you offer yourself, just as you are, to God as a gift of love. It is the desire to converse with God, to be drawn closer to him, to identify more deeply with him. Prayer seeks to unite the one who prays with God himself. THAT is the goal and end of prayer - other considerations such as the granting of requests take a lesser role in prayer (even though they often take a priority of time!)

## 1. PRAYER AND FAITH

The apostles asked Our Lord *to teach them how to pray*. This teaches us several things. For a start, these were the men Christ chose to be the foundation stones of the Church - we revere them as among the greatest of the saints for that reason. Two of them, Matthew and Luke, were evangelists who wrote Gospels, while another three contributed books of the New Testament (Peter, James and Jude). These are the first bishops, the men who brought the faith to the world and whose testimony is the benchmark we use to determine whether the teaching we receive today is truly the teaching of Christ. YET, for all of this holiness and closeness to God, they needed to ask Christ for instruction in the ways of prayer. We should be encouraged: if even the chosen Twelve had to rely on Christ to show them what true prayer was, we should not feel discouraged if we feel we do not know how to pray as we ought!

Secondly, the apostles question assumes a vital point: they all realised that the only one capable of answering their need was Christ. Above, before and beyond all others, **Christ** is the teacher in the ways of prayer - he is the master because prayer (raising the heart and mind to the Father) is his nature. He has always done this and continues to do it for all time. Please note that if this is true then it says quite a lot about the *content* of true prayer: Christ's life before he was born was lived in the presence of his

Father, constantly adoring him. THIS is prayer, before we get round to things like petition and intercession. Prayer is about adopting the mind and heart of Christ – it is about spending time adoring God for his inner goodness and beauty. It is about giving ourselves to him without reservation – about allowing ourselves to wonder and to give time to awe in the company of the most sublime and tender love. It is about opening up and developing an on-going living and personal relationship with God. It means going beyond the first step of prayer (which is usually petition – please look after my gerbil etc.) and coming to God as he really is – the power and splendour of the Almighty who created the universe, and the intimate, gentle lover of the soul. Prayer means taking on board the full dimensions of God, not just the ones I find immediately attractive, because I am coming to know God as he truly is, not as I would like him to be. Prayer will mean going through all the aspects of a human relationship – it will mean coming to know myself better, learning to see where I project on to God a false image of who he is, or a partial image. It will mean recognising that in the past (and even the present) I underestimate God or misunderstand his ways (as we do to each other all the time!). Prayer will mean being prepared to say, “I’m sorry” to God on occasion, just as we do to each other – when we unjustly criticise, when we ignore each other or become self-obsessed. Prayer will mean discovering hidden aspects to our own characters – realising potential we never knew we had. It will mean becoming the people we could always have been – and this means changing for the better. In short, prayer is about a living and dynamic encounter with the living God – and this always elevates and glorifies us. Prayer is about becoming more fully the living human image of Jesus Christ – which you are already, as members of the Body of Christ, the Church.

Let us go further: if Christ is the master and teacher in the ways of prayer, then prayer is VERY closely related to faith. FIRST we need to believe that there is someone to pray to (belief in God). THEN, we need to acknowledge that God has both name and character - we believe in the person of JESUS CHRIST as the one who shows us how to pray. As Christian people, this means that Christ has absolute pre-eminence: while we may learn helpful techniques from other world religions (Hindu meditation techniques, Buddhist mantras etc.,) these are not *alternatives* to Christ, not substitutes for him. We accept that the Holy Spirit works through all those whom God has created and that God is revealing himself to all people - so there are *elements of truth* and sanctity present in all people. BUT we add that the source of this holiness and truth is still CHRIST. It is only through immersion in the full mystery of the God/man, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, Jesus Christ, that we have the opportunity to perceive the length and the breadth, the height and the depth of prayer and the fruitful relationship with God. Christian prayer is unashamedly, resolutely and absolutely confidently **CHRISTOCENTRIC**. Christ is the teacher of prayer, the heart of prayer and he leads us to the goal of prayer - but that goal is not Christ alone: the goal of prayer is the fullness of God himself - the Blessed Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Prayer is Christocentric (or Christ-centred), but *NOT* Christomonist (or Christ *alone*). SO, prayer is only truly Christian when it embraces all three persons. We should do our best to avoid ignoring any of the persons of the Trinity. Some denominations have found that they have developed this way, and to their cost: some focus so much on Christ that the Father and the Holy Spirit get lost and forgotten. Many others find they become Spirit-oriented to such a degree that Father and Son fade into obscurity. We must be constantly careful to develop our habit of prayer through relating to *all three persons*. Many prayers end with an explicit

trinitarian formula (“...we ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, you Son, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.”) This is done for an important reason. We may find that we are especially drawn to the Spirit, or have a very close relationship with Jesus – but we are constantly called by the Church to put each person of the Godhead in to perspective with the others. After all, Jesus is the Son – of whom? The Father. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of whom? Sometimes he is called the spirit of the Father and sometimes the Spirit of Jesus. You see, according to the Scriptures and the ancient faith of the Church, where one person of God acts, all are involved. We *can't* have a prayerful relationship with one without the others taking part (any more than I can have a meaningful relationship with your hand without the rest of you being involved as well!) This sometimes takes conscious effort on our part to remember and to help develop. If you are always praying to the Spirit, but never to the Father, then ask the Spirit to help you appreciate the real-ness of the Father, his closeness to you, his love for you – that it is *his* Spirit you feel so close to, that is was *he* who sent the Spirit to you as comforter and advocate.

### ***The Power of Prayer***

Beyond this, prayer is a matter of faith because we are called by Christ to put our faith and confidence in the power and effectiveness of prayer –

- “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Mt. 7:7-11)

Prayer requires from the pray-er a certain faithful disposition. This is not the same as a gullible or thoughtless attitude. We should not think that God is giving his guarantee that, no matter how inappropriate the gift we request, it will be given to us. Prayer is not like this – God is not a sugar daddy who indulges the merest whim of his spoilt children. Yet, there is the guarantee of the power of the almighty God behind the prayers we offer in truth. To believe this takes faith. Prayer is not a matter for the fainthearted, not for those who are resisting faith or careless about whether they believe or not. Prayer is a *powerful* thing – it is to tap into the divine will of God for the creation he has made and redeemed, and then to take a part in the unleashing on that creation of the graces that God has planned for the renewal and rebirth of creation. Prayer requires that the one who prays is fully committed to that plan of salvation and ready to submit to the will of the Father - not out of servile fear but out of voluntary submission to the one whom we trust with our very lives as a gift of love. Prayer is founded upon the unshakeable confidence that Christ did not lie to us: our prayers are effective and not just whispered words that bring us a form of psychological comfort but without working for good. We need to found our prayer upon this renewed faith in the faithfulness of Christ to his promise.

## **Answered and Unanswered Prayer**

- 2728 *“Our battle [of prayer] has to confront what we experience as failure in prayer: discouragement during periods of dryness; sadness that, because we have “great possessions,” we have not given all to the Lord; disappointment over not being heard according to our own will; wounded pride, stiffened by the indignity that is ours as sinners; our resistance to the idea that prayer is a free and unmerited gift; and so forth. The conclusion is always the same: what good does it do to pray? To overcome these obstacles, we must battle to gain humility, trust and perseverance.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2728)*

Just how powerful is the prayer that I offer? This is misleadingly easy to answer. All of us can think of prayers we have offered in fervent expectation (“Lord, get me through this exam”, “Lord, help me find that key”, “God, give me patience”) but which have ended in disaster - the exam was failed, the key never turned up, patience finally snapped! SO, prayers are ineffective and are not answered - or so it seems.

But, what gives us the impression that the only answer to the request we make can possibly be “YES”? We are very unwilling to see a “NO” as an answer at all. We need to pause and remember that in the spiritual life we are barely even children - more like infants. We would probably all blanch if asked to give a talk about prayer or spirituality, and say we are just amateurs. We should remember this humility when we come to presenting our petitions: if we know so little about prayer, it stands to reason that we know equally little about what we truly need or what is good for us. How often do we pin our hopes for happiness or satisfaction on to a new job, a move of house, a pay rise, a new parish priest, a new government or whatever, only to find that what we thought would be the answer actually left things very much as they were before? The uncomfortable fact of the matter is that we don't know what we need and so regularly ask for what will damage us - is it wrong of God to withhold these things from us? Would we not argue that if he did grant our every wish and these ended up wrecking our lives that ultimately he was responsible, after all he is God and could see the effect it would have on us and so should have resisted our pleas? It has been said that God's punishment on us is not the inflicting of suffering but the carrying out of the request we make of him: these invariably do us more damage than the plan God has for us. Be careful what you pray for - if you are truly unlucky, they might be granted! Flippant as this sounds, there is a great deal of truth in it.

Interpreting how God answers our prayers is a very difficult thing to do - but all of us are called to develop that ability. The Church has from the very start stressed that we need the full compliment of the Christian virtues to pray effectively and to interpret how God is responding to our petitions. We need humility in addressing them, so as to recognise that what we request may be for the worst and not the best; we need patience, for the time delay in offering the prayers and the response as it is given (why is God bound to our perception of time and the development of events?) and most of all we need *divine* wisdom, the eyes not of the physical world but of the world to come, in order to see events and responses as they impinge on God's plan of salvation, not just on my plan for those around me.

The power of prayer is not shown in how often our prayers seemingly receive a favourable answer but in what they are capable of achieving. Once again this ties prayer into faith. Christ gives a very dramatic demonstration of the potential power of

prayer when it is exercised not for personal benefit and as the agent of the Father's will. After the Transfiguration, when Christ's divine nature is revealed to Peter, James and John, these four descend from the mountain to rejoin the other nine apostles. A crowd had gathered round a man whose son was an epileptic. He asks Christ to heal his son since the other apostles were unable to do so. Christ cures the boy and the other apostles ask him later why they were unable to cast the devil out. Christ replies, *"This kind can not be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting"* (Mk. 9:29). His point is powerful - prayer is the most powerful weapon in the Christian's arsenal and is effective when every other means fails. When we have exhausted all the other means at our disposal and drawn a blank, only prayer is left, and this is still powerful enough to accomplish even the miraculous.

BUT note the reference to fasting: how often do we associate these two together? Christ is urging the disciple to unite prayer with personal sacrifice. *What we pray for needs to flow not just from desire but also from the instinct of faith* - and this is felt not just in the heart or mind but also in the whole person, body as well as spirit. We are asked to consider that we have something to contribute to the prayers we offer: our own voluntary offering of suffering. *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is right."* (Mt. 5:6). Prayer is not for the fainthearted: it requires us to give even as we request, to be willing to offer ourselves as part of the solution not just as the mediator.

If we have any other doubts about the effectiveness of our prayers when they are fully united with the Father, I would point you to two places in the Scriptures. The first is the raising of Lazarus: St. John records this extraordinary miracle as being simply the response of the Father to the prayer of Christ. When he is taken to see the tomb, Christ raises his eyes to heaven and says

- *"Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that it was you who sent me."* When he had said this he cried out in a loud voice, *"Lazarus, come out."* (Jn. 11:41-43)

Christ seems eager for the people with him to realise that through the power of prayer to unite the human being with the Father, even raising the dead is possible. I'm not suggesting that we all go to the cemeteries to test whether we can do the same - but to show how Christ placed the highest value on the power of true and generous prayer. And he demonstrates that this confidence is not misplaced.

The other place in the Scriptures is the Book of Revelation. A repeated pattern runs throughout the Book. We read about the members of the Church on earth who are suffering bitter persecution at the hands of the Beast, the Anti Christ and their followers. The martyrs in heaven (those who have suffered the same tortures on account of the faith) call out and implore the Father to vindicate the faithful on earth who are made to suffer for their faith in Christ. In dramatic response to their prayers, the angels are sent to bring division and confusion to the armies of the beast and the serpent. They pour out the chalices of God's judgement on those who would seek to stamp out the holy and righteous (see Revelation 6:9-11, 8:1-5). Please don't misunderstand me: I am not encouraging us to pray for vengeance on those we feel are persecuting the Church - I only mean to point out that the Scriptures are absolutely

certain about the effectiveness of the prayers of those who are fully in communion with the will of the Father. We can be the releasing mechanism for the graces of salvation that the Father wishes to give to his creation.

### ***Prayer as the Conversation of the Family of God***

Finally, prayer is the spiritual outflow of our faith because it rests wholly on the relationship we claim with God. We pray not as privileged servants or as slaves who are given leave to speak in front of the King. Our prayers are offered in the greatest presumption, which would be blasphemous if we were not commanded and invited to do so by Christ. Every prayer is at its heart “Our Father” (which we will look at more thoroughly next time). This means that we pray in the character of children speaking to their Father, not just to our Almighty. Prayer is a *family affair*, based on the intimacy of family relationships. This does not preclude wonder, worship and humility: in fact it presupposes that we acknowledge that God is the Almighty - but that he has become our Father as well, whose life flows within us and who responds to our pleas because of the love he holds for his family, rather than because he will gain from it. Prayer is where we claim the nature that we are, coming confidently, yet aware that this is an unearned privilege, to the Lord and Master of all creation, the Alpha and Omega, the originator of life in all its forms, the Most Holy God - and call him ‘Papa’. This is only possible because God has become our Father through giving us his life in Baptism.

So Christian prayer is constructed upon Baptism and is the spiritual living out of Baptism. Here above all, in the secret of our hearts and in the public forum of the assembled community of the Church on a Sunday, we take advantage of our supremely privileged divine Sonship, our filial claim on God, and petition for the salvation of the world.

## **2. PRAYER AND CONVERSION**

By now it should be clear that there is a great deal more to prayer than simply telling God what we want or feel he ought to give. Prayer is part of the curriculum God gives us to help *us* to mature. It always comes as quite a shock when we realise that the purpose of prayer is not for us to pressure God into changing *his* plans but actually for prayer to change *our* plans, to help and encourage *us to grow* and to enable *us* to change. Ancient Greek gods (and for that matter ancient Roman, Viking and many other pantheia) are striking for their fickle character. Gods fought against gods, rivalries were rife, and human beings got caught up in the eternal game of divine one-up-manship. Gods would choose to favour a particular human being for their own purposes (to irritate a divine rival, for instance) and would just as speedily drop him (or her) should that be more effective in humiliating the rival, or if they should lose that particular round. Changing the minds of the gods was the food and drink of ancient religions - because they believed that the gods were as fickle as we are - minds could be clouded over with clever arguments, bribes or whatever, and the really good negotiator with the gods could pull off the occasional stunning volte-face. To these religions, prayer was the way that human beings influenced the turbulent and changing plots hatched among the gods.

All that was true of the idols of ancient Greece and Rome. BUT IT IS NOT TRUE OF GOD. This is so for three critical reasons.

1. We believe that God is *all knowing*, so that the future is known to him, and is present to him.
2. He is *omnipotent*, so that he is the undisputed master of all time and creation, without a rival to fight and struggle against.
3. Finally, and critically, we believe God is *impassable* - unchanging, not developing. His plan of salvation is not being made up as he goes along and so never changing, updated, swerving from track.

In other words, our concept of God as good, Truth, Love etc., teaches us that not only will he *not lie to us*, but that also *we cannot stop God in his tracks and make him adjust and alter his plans*. We are not in control of God.

Does that sound unfortunate or regrettable? Some people are disappointed when this is pointed out – they feel that there is no point in praying any more if we can't change God's mind. It seems to make God out to be cold-hearted, uncaring and resistant to compromise or negotiation. BUT – remember not to judge God by our standards (as the Romans, Greeks, Vikings, Hindus etc all do). *We* need to be prepared to adapt our plans, re-negotiate, change direction etc on a regular basis – but ask yourself why? – because we come across unexpected situations, unforeseen obstacles, uncontrollable events that *force* us to reconsider. Is this true of God? Does he plan for the future not knowing what on earth is going to happen? Are there events beyond his control that could make him stop to adapt his plans? NO – he is omnipotent and all knowing – his plan of salvation is constructed with all events taken into consideration. God has seen the whole game played out and his strategy is perfectly adapted to achieve his goal – the salvation of his creation. He does not have to re-think because he has already taken it *all* into consideration.

BUT – think of what it would mean if we had our way, and God was as changeable as we might like him to be. This alternative sounds attractive until you start to think about it. Imagine that we could persuade God to change his mind and his plan: it would mean that either

1. God moves to a *better* plan (in which case thank goodness we corrected God's intentions!)
2. OR that he takes up plan B which is a fallback, less-beneficial plan (in which case, doesn't that make God seem rather pathetic, even fickle, bouncing from his plan to a second-best, just because of little old us?).

Neither of these sound like God to me - it would mean that either he was an amateur who needed us to improve on his botched-together plans or (even worse) that he was indecisive, unable to hold to his plan of salvation without changing his mind every time one of us got on to him.

Worse of all - think of the confusion and paralysis caused to our poor old God if he intends to perform one action, is pleaded with not to do it by one interested party (so he decides to change his mind) only to find that a different group are now begging him to go ahead as he had originally planned - what's an indecisive and vacillating God to do? NO - if we could change God's mind, we wouldn't really want him as God because he wouldn't be a God we could place our confidence in.

SO - prayer is not really about us persuading God to change his plans and give us what we feel we ought to have been given. Prayer needs to take into consideration that

1. God is PERFECT (thus his plan of salvation is incapable of being improved, even by people as wise as you or I!)
2. God is IMPASSABLE (thus that God is incapable of sudden or even slow change, evolution, coming to a new conclusion – he is incapable of getting better, more perfect or initiating a more perfect plan of salvation).

We are not in the business of *improving* God's plan, nor of coaxing him to take a greater interest in what is going on down here. We pray not because we think of God as a fairy godmother who is there to carry out my wishes as if I knew best for the entire world, or as an almighty sugar daddy who just wants to spoil us rotten by pandering to our every whim - we pray because we acknowledge that it is not God who needs to change but that it is WE who need to change the way we think and act.

SO – we return to the description of prayer mentioned at the beginning “*the raising of one's heart and mind to God*” - the movement is significant: St. John Damascene is saying that prayer is about us becoming more like God, adopting his outlook on creation in general and my situation in particular. WE are to try to approach God's perspective: it is not described as “the lowering of God's mind and heart to us.” Prayer is about conversion of **our** whole attitude and approach to the world, including ourselves. Prayer, when it is regular and sincere (even if it is brief), has the capacity to *change* us radically. It opens our eyes to our shortcomings and invites us to embrace change so as to imitate Christ. Prayer gives us new and greater vision to see what had always been present in us but we had never noticed. Prayer awakes within us the call of God to follow him and to grow in holiness. The more we adore God in prayer the more we will find we *want* to imitate him because we will understand that imitating him is the *only* way we will find peace and contentment. In the words of St. Augustine:

- “*You created us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts will be restless until they find their rest in you.*”

**Prayer changes us, not God.** Why should this be, considering that prayer is one of the few things that we consider is our gift to God? It changes us because like everything else, prayer is not possible but for the grace of God within us. In other words, we may *think* that we are giving it, and we may *feel* that we are giving it, but prayer is actually the work of the Holy Spirit within us offering praise and worship to the Father through Jesus Christ. Prayer is God's work, encouraged and taking place in our souls, the deepest and most intimate part of us. Don't take my word for it - this is no less than the teaching of God himself, speaking through the pen of St. Paul:

- “All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the Spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of Sonship. **When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our Spirit that we are children of God.**” (Rom. 8:14-16)
- “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, **but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.** And he who searches the hearts and minds of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” (Rom. 8:26-27)
- “Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal. 4:6)

Prayer, for St. Paul, is not more and no less than the co-operation of our souls with the Holy Spirit in praising the wonder and glory of the Father. Prayer is inspired and fired by the power of God himself and is given its transformative force by the presence of the Holy Spirit who leads us to pray, inspires the desire in us to seek the God we love and who underpins the feeble words we can muster with “sighs too deep for words” - it is the Holy Spirit who prays alongside and through our prayers, who makes our prayers efficacious, dynamic and life-changing. No wonder that an old priest warned me once not to pray unless I was prepared to change. We are combining our efforts with the most powerful agent there can be - God himself - when we open our mouths or minds in prayer, and we are tapping into the very source of life and existence in order to be able to utter a single word or compose a single thought.

Prayer is the effort we make to unite our minds and souls with God - the action of converting our very persons to an attitude of accepting the will of the Father. It is born of the realisation that God's plan for us is that of the perfect Father: this plan is engineered for our glorification and sanctification. Furthermore, it recognises that anything other than the Father's plan is a lesser deal – and we will not be satisfied with anything less (although we will often feel that God is either wrong about what will make us happy, or actually doesn't want us to be happy). Events are often difficult to see through these eyes: when our faith leads us to suffer, we are prone to question the wisdom of God's plan and to feel that we can improve on it. This is why it is necessary for us to change: we need to learn how to see with the eyes of faith - this requires an appreciation of *deferred* gratification rather than *immediate* gratification. It is a common practice in business and commerce: rather than take an immediate pay rise when the tax year is over, a shop owner may choose to plough his profits back into the shop so as to maximise his profits next year or the year after: short-term, present day sacrifice brings long-term, deferred benefits. This mentality is one which we apply to the spiritual life: prayer slowly converts the mind and heart to understand that growth in the spiritual life requires some measure of sacrifice of immediate pleasures so as to achieve much greater benefits in the future.

SO - the model of prayer boils down to the garden of Gethsemane: knowing that his mission as Messiah and Son of God was leading him to arrest, conviction, suffering and death, Christ prays in the garden in the grip of the human fear of dying. His

prayer exemplifies the attitude of the Christian disciple, which we need to adopt as our own:

- *“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.” (Lk. 22:42)*

We should ask ourselves: was Christ's prayer heard and answered by the Father? It certainly doesn't seem so, since Christ still went to his agonising death on the cross. On the other hand, he is the Father's beloved Son so what reason could the Father possibly have for not hearing and answering the Son's prayer?

Christ's prayer actually is not an appeal for the Father to alter his plan of salvation, but more truly a prayer of acceptance of the will of the Father. This is true of all prayer: no matter what we offer in our prayers, the bottom line of the prayer should be *“nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.”* Prayer is the request that we be converted to right thinking and divine wisdom so as to see and recognise that the Father's plan for us, while requiring self-sacrifice in this life, is actually ordered to maximum glory and honour in the life to come. Just as the glory of the Resurrection was not possible without first the necessity of Christ's death, so too, our glorification at the end of time is not possible without the acts of self-sacrifice which God asks of us in our lives. Prayer is the key way that you and I learn to recognise this. It does not make the pain we suffer less painful, but it does indicate that suffering is not meaningless but a path to greater joy. Through it, we are brought to greater purity.

Through prayer, you and I ask for the strength and courage to face the trials of living with the knowledge which divine wisdom and sight give to us. Who would not happily accept 70 or 80 years of suffering if this qualified them for 700 or 800 years of incomprehensible joy and contentment? But we are not dealing with 700 or 800 years but with time unending. Gethsemane is the key to understanding those prayers you and I offer regularly but seem on the surface to be unanswered. The answer comes not through the Father simply scrapping his eternal plan for the salvation of mankind, but in him pouring on his Son the grace and strength that his human nature needed in order to cope with the fear he felt in approaching the cross. Prayer is the plea we address to God to release the graces he knows we need in order to undergo the necessary sufferings that will make us perfect.

- Prayer is the effort we make to think and relate to the Father with the mind of Christ: it is the submission we make to his will and the recognition we offer that our view on our lives is narrow and compromised by ignorance: we place our trust in God because we are confident that it is only God who sees our lives as they truly are, and only God who is perfect in his motivation when he asks us to accept suffering: we accept that his love for us means that he is no sadist but a loving Father who is trying to help his children to mature to the glory he has elected to shower on them.
- *“Prayer is both a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. It always presupposes effort. The great figures of prayer of the Old Covenant before Christ, as well as the Mother of God, the saints, and he himself, all teach us this: prayer is a battle. Against whom? Against ourselves and against the wiles of the tempter who does all he can to turn man away from prayer,*

*away from union with God. We pray as we live, because we live as we pray. If we do not want to act habitually according to the Spirit of Christ, neither can we pray habitually in his name. The "spiritual battle" of the Christian's new life is inseparable from the battle of prayer." (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2725)*

- Prayer enables the mortal human, beset with worries and fears, to face trials that require of him superhuman strength to be faithful. Prayer, offered with sincerity, gives the pray-er supernatural grace to choose the path that is less comfortable in the short term because he recognises that it is the only path to God. Where human strength runs out on us, and where human wisdom and ingenuity stands powerless, abandoning us to face an inevitable, irresistible and overwhelming trial – then the grace of prayer gives courage to the flagging and a supernatural capacity to endure whatever comes. The great martyrs of the Church demonstrate the power of prayer. Through prayer they were enabled to give what is beyond human strength to give: the willing and often joyous gift of their own lives, through oftentimes the most brutal and savage forms of torture – knowing that one word renouncing their God would spare their lives. Prayer turns mortals into martyrs. It stiffens the sinews of the staggering, reinforcing the courage and determination of those who would choose God in preference to all else. Prayer is the life of the disciple.

### **3. PRAYER AND LIFE**

An ancient saying of the Early Church shows us that prayer is not the exclusive property of the spiritual giants like St. Teresa of Avila or St. Francis: the early Christians used to say, *“birds fly, fish swim, men pray.”* Their point is clear: just as flying is essential for the bird and swimming is one of the defining characteristics of fish, so too, man's natural habitat is prayer. Prayer is actually the place where man is most truly himself and most honest about his nature: man is more than purely material or biological - he is spirit as well as body, and this needs exercise every bit as much as his corporeal body. Without prayer, mankind is starved of the food of the soul: without food, his soul withers and man is diseased. From the very beginning, the earliest Christians realised that prayer was essential for the survival of the life of faith. Prayer is the environment in which the Christian lives, for here he communicates with the God he not only reveres and serves but also adores as Father, Brother and indwelling Spirit.

At its most basic, prayer is analogous to the communication we observe between two people in love: this communication is ever new and inventive in its forms, it uses words and silence, actions and stillness, it uses formulas (“I love you”) and rituals (Valentine's Day cards, quiet dinners, celebration of significant events like wedding date), it is expressed in both private moments and in public celebrations. Fully rounded prayer uses all these things – quiet moments of intimate stillness and public moments of shared and vocal expression. It uses gesture (like the sign of the cross, or opening the hands) as well as stillness; it employs formulae and set phrases as well as spontaneity and personal expression.

More than this, prayer is like the communication between lovers in the sense that love finds survival very difficult when there is no communication at all. Most petitions for divorce in civil courts today that are filed by the wife cite mental cruelty as the cause of the marital collapse, and usually this is shown in the failure of communication between husband and wife (how often have we heard the line “We just don't talk any more”, or “We seem to be leading entirely different lives”?). Love, without the expression of that love to the other, quickly becomes stagnant, inert and lifeless.

For the lover to retain his or her love, he or she needs to communicate his love. In the same way, for the disciple to remain in love with God, in faith, he or she needs to communicate that love and faith - and prayer is the first and essential step in that communication. *The Christian who has stopped praying is very close to becoming an ex-Christian.* A healthy, vigorous, daily and varied prayer life is indispensable for the Christian to remain faithful to God.

One final thing: the Christian is called by his faith to discern and follow the path prepared for him by the Father. This can't be discerned or diagnosed by instinct or common sense alone - after all, the cross was not the logical or common sense action for Christ to surrender himself to. It takes more than the compliment of human wisdom or common sense to recognise the will of God and to accept it: and without prayer this is all we are left with. In other words, it is impossible to recognise the will of God and then to follow it without a regular habit of prayer. Through prayer, we come to reflect on God's call to each of us – and thus to adopt God's plan for me over and above my own ambitions for myself.

#### **4. PRAYER - COMPOSITION AND VARIETY**

SO - what should we be doing when we come to prayer? What do we say? Is prayer simply a time to complain to God, or is it the last resort we turn to when in an impossible situation? Is prayer about telling God we are sorry for sins? Is it about chatting to him as we would to a neighbour over the fence? As you can see, prayer takes all forms - as does 'conversation'. Our experiences and our mood will affect the way we are able to pray in every moment.

Then, of course, there is the other side of the coin. If we discovered that our conversations with friends included only one or two of the above, we would realise something was wrong. There is no harm in turning to a friend when in trouble, but we would think twice if a “friend” only contacted us when those difficult moments came. Prayer, like conversation, will take many forms and colours: but there needs to be a balance. It is one thing to ‘have a go at God’ (as St. Teresa of Avila reputedly did when her wagon lost a wheel while crossing a river in Spain), and when done tongue-in-cheek, this may perhaps be healthy (if a little impudent!), but it is quite another for us to spend most of our time in prayer blaming God for the sufferings we undergo or accusing him of standing-by, ignoring our difficulties etc. All things in moderation and in balance.

From the time of the Early Church Fathers, when prayer was developing as a specifically Christian experience, the Fathers slowly perceived that prayer is a broad title which comprises four main categories: in effect all prayers we offer will fall into

one of these four. The Fathers speak of prayer moving from one to another of these categories: the rounded and complete prayer will contain all four, each to their proper degree:

#### **4.1 CATS and ACTS**

The acronyms CATS or ACTS help us to remember the composition of well-rounded prayers, and so to develop a healthy and balanced life of prayer:

1. **Contrition:** prayer begins with the recognition of who we are and the state we are in. We are prodigal sons, run-away children who have received so much, but chosen to abandon it in favour of what has taken our fancy. We need to acknowledge this because until we do, we are living in a fantasy. We are not meant to fling ourselves into a pit of fire and wallow in guilt, but to change our hearts, repent and begin again.
2. **Adoration:** contrition leads us to love because we realise that despite the sins we have committed, we are still loved by God, offered forgiveness for all of them and given the opportunity to return within the family of God. Adoration is not simply a rapture of love for this can too easily be inspired by something other than disinterested love. Adoration is the offering of love to God because of who he is rather than because of the benefits we are likely to receive from him. Prayer of adoration can be inspired by our contrite sorrow as we contemplate how merciful and compassionate is our Saviour who chose to suffer himself rather than see us suffer in death. *Adoration is the deepest form of prayer because it is the giving of love to God in recognition of his holiness.* It is the recognition of who he is and the response of the soul that is drawn to worship and adore what it understands as the greatest good and the only perfect good that is.
3. **Thanksgiving:** this is more than saying thank you for the good things we have been given. It is also the celebration of these gifts - the commitment to use them as God has intended them to be used. Thanksgiving is the gift of joyful praise for the majesty and glory of God, as it is manifest in the world around us AND as it is hidden from our eyes but revealed in the mystical writings of the saints, in the Scriptures etc. – the glory of God in heaven. NOTE that the very heart of prayer itself is about us giving to God - we praise the holiness and beauty of the Almighty, recognising him for who he is and allowing ourselves time to bask in the radiance of his life. The psalms contain many examples of this sometimes-exuberant form of prayer the purpose of which is no more than to give God the glory and wonder of his name. NOTE also, that the word for thanksgiving in Greek is '*Eucharistein*' from which we get the word "Eucharist": the Mass is actually the most perfect form of thanksgiving we can possibly have, because what do we offer to God in praise of the glory of his name but Jesus Christ himself, the perfect God/man, infinite himself in glory praise and holiness. We could never give to God a more perfect or complete gift of praise and thanksgiving than we offer each time we take part in the Mass. The only gift worthy of God's glory is God himself, and in the Mass this gift is precisely what the Father enables us to give him.

4. **Supplication:** note that as far as the Fathers of the Early Church were concerned, this is the final (and least important) aspect of prayer. It comes as the winding down after the true climax of prayer and is seen as the after-thought of the praise we give to him. Supplication is a difficult area as we have seen already because God tells us to ask with confidence knowing that what we ask will be given, but yet at the same time experience tells us that what we ask for is almost never given to us. I would offer a word of advice: pray for the good of other people and not for yourself. Ask God to release the graces which he has planned for those you know who suffer or who have asked you for prayers: if they are known to you, it is more than likely that the graces God wishes to give them will come through you as much as any other. If you do wish to pray for yourself, pray very simply and without trying to load the question: ask God to give you the strength to undergo the trials he has invited you to share with Christ, and to give you the graces to see, understand and desire his holy will for you. Let God dictate the pace, the events and their outcome without trying to guess what would be the best outcome yourself.

This system is rounded and balanced, accommodating joy (Thanksgiving) with sorrow (Contrition); it finds room for giving (Adoration) as well as for asking (Supplication). The order can be altered slightly, transposing Contrition with Adoration. When we spend a little time in prayer, we should try to ensure that we give sufficient time to each of these aspects of praying: when we do, we will find that we spend less time asking whether our supplications have been answered, since these make up only a fraction of the time we spend in prayer.

## ***4.2 Public Liturgy and Private Devotion***

Today especially, many people find public liturgical prayer not to their liking. Many times people have said to me that they find they can pray much better when they are out on the hillsides admiring creation than when they are in a church at a time they may not feel much like prayer and surrounded by people whom they find distracting. For most of our society, prayer is only experienced in the private form, since today it is a small minority who still attend church in any of its forms. The temptation is to say that since prayer is such a personal experience, it should always be experienced as the individual finds beneficial. While this sounds convincing, it is only a partial truth.

Yes, prayer is intensely private; it is the joining of the individual's soul with the life of the Trinity. BUT it is also the medicine that God administers to us in order to help us recover from the illness of sin. Prayer is not just aimed to give us satisfying feelings: it has a deeper purpose, which is our cleansing at the level of the soul. This being so, since personal feelings of satisfaction are not actually the reason or purpose of praying, we should beware of judging 'good' prayer simply by the criteria of what makes us feel better. Prayer is the prescription God gives us having diagnosed us as suffering from the effects of sin. If we use this analogy of health and illness, we will see how shortsighted it is to dismiss public liturgical prayer just because we don't find it immediately satisfying or congenial. It is not the patient who diagnoses himself, prescribes the medication and then evaluates the effect of the medicine on his complaint. We need to remember that we give ourselves to prayer not simply because it is fun or immediately rewarding but because it is necessary for us, no matter how we react to it at the time. Athletes who wish to compete at the highest level need

patience to see the effect of their training programme in their performance: a few days of training which leaves the athlete feeling as though he could shatter the world record are not a trustworthy indication. Training takes time, patience and constant effort, and the athlete needs the mutual support of company in which to do this. Prayer is similar: anyone who has been on pilgrimage to a major shrine will know the powerful effect that being with so many similarly-motivated people can have (Lourdes, Fatima, Jerusalem, Rome, Walsingham etc.).

More than this, prayer in community is an essential part of our baptismal character. We are united to Christ by being united to the community that is filled with Christ – this is what Baptism accomplishes. We need to make prayer from within the midst of the community the central part of our life of prayer: here we receive the sacraments, here we are most truly the faithful bride of Christ, the new Israel, the new Jerusalem, the people God has chosen as his own. The Church has always put a premium on the participation of the faithful in the prayer of the assembled people of God, and this has been so from Apostolic times - the Acts of the Apostles records that the baptised were faithful to “*the apostles’ teaching, and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*” (Acts 2:42). They met regularly to pray (in addition to, rather than in preference to, praying alone in private) especially in times of crisis (cf. when Peter was arrested Acts 12:5) and in time of great celebration (cf. when Peter and John were released by the chief priests unharmed Acts 4:31). So important was it that the disciples met together to pray regularly that the author of the Letter to the Hebrews refers with disdain of those who “*neglect to meet together*” (Hebrews 10:25). What is interesting is that he feels no need to explain *why* he is critical of these people - it was so fundamental and accepted a part of the faith that the mere mention of those who were no longer bothered to come to pray with the rest of the church would leave no doubt in people's minds. This was a grave error they are committing, and one that was so accepted and understood that explanation was unnecessary.

What we need to remember is that for our prayer to be balanced, we need to retain a place for regular private AND regular public prayer. These are not alternatives but mutually supporting and mutually essential aspects of prayer. Public liturgical prayer on its own (without private individual prayer) runs the risk of becoming remote and no longer engaging the heart and soul of the individual. On the other hand, a diet composed solely of private individual prayer (and lacking public liturgical prayer of the community) rapidly becomes self-serving, introspective and no more than a matter of convenience. We need not only to make room for both but also to aim at all times to grow in appreciation for the unique qualities of each, and the benefits they bring.

- **Public Liturgy** (*the solemn worship of God by the assembled Church*) - all the sacraments, esp. the Mass; also the Divine Office, Stations of the Cross, Benediction, processions esp. of the Blessed Sacrament or Our Lady cf. Lourdes.
- **Private Devotions** (*the prayer offered in private or in secret*) - rosary, litanies, novenas, scripture meditation, lectio divina, prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, extemporary invocations, acts of adoration or contrition.
- **Private devotions in public** - rosary, Holy Hour etc.

### **4.3 Formal Prayer and Informal Prayer**

*“Should I use forms of prayer already composed by saints or holy men and women, OR should I use my own words and pray extemporaneously?”*

Styles and fashions change with the wind. 50 years ago, the emphasis for many people might have been to use formal prayers - formulas well tried and tested, written by the holy and the famous. This is not to say that extempore prayer or private personal prayerful conversation with God was not done or considered a bad thing - only to recognise that if one was given greater prominence it could be said to be the more formal element. Since the 1960s, our culture and our society have changed dramatically. Whereas in the past, society put great value in conformity, in abiding by a system, in each member of society obeying the rules and regulations of the time, nowadays the emphasis is very different: we have moved from the corporate to the individual. Today we prize individualism above obedience, spontaneity above rubric, go-with-the-flow above ritual, casualness above formality. We are more likely to hear the phrase *“I’ll do what I want to do”* than the line *“I’ll fit in with everyone else.”*

There is much to be said for both approaches, particularly because they balance each other and prevent us going to one extreme or the other. Without the more casual and individualistic side, we would become so burdened by rule, rubric and *‘the way things have always been done’* that we would lose our appreciation of our own value. On the other hand, without acknowledging the role of custom, ritual, formality and belonging to a wider group than just ourselves, we become utterly self-obsessed and lose any concept of the solemn and the weighty.

Just as our society needs to value what is beneficial in the formal and rubricised as well as the casual and individualistic, so too our prayer needs to give due time and opportunity to each of these. Today there is a tendency to swing away from the formal and embrace, sometimes exclusively, the private, casual and informal. This is no improvement on a past that was perhaps too conscious of the need for formality. Just as we need time for ourselves as well as engagement in some form in a wider group for our psychological well being, so too *our life of prayer needs both elements to be rounded and full*. Prayer is not exclusively an individualistic thing, nor is it adequately explored when restricted to times when I am alone, walking the dog or whatever. We need to remember that we are incorporated into a community through Baptism, and that this needs to be expressed and exercised by regular and formal times of prayer (which have, by necessity, to be more formal and rubricised than our private prayer might be).

### **4.4 PRAYER: GOD AND THE SAINTS**

Save the difficult one to the end, I hear you cry! What about the Catholic practice of praying to the saints and to Our Lady? So far we have only really concerned ourselves with the manner and variety of prayer to God. However, the issue of prayer directed to those other than God himself is a source of great confusion and of some concern to most non-Catholics (and, sadly, to many Catholics, too).

What confusion? Ask people if we pray to the saints. You would be surprised by the number of Catholics who are confused about this. ***YES – we do pray to the saints:*** as

our older brothers and sisters, we ask for their help and we praise the holiness that God has perfected in them. We honour them because they have triumphed (by the grace of God) in the very same battle that we ourselves are engaged in: and in praising them, we are acknowledging the power and work of God. If you are under any illusions about praying to the saints, ask yourself what the Hail Mary is, if it is not a prayer? Or the prayer to St. Michael (“Holy Michael, the archangel, defend us in the day of battle...”). Or the prayer for the conversion of England (addressed to Our Lady – “O Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God and our most gentle Queen and Mother...”). Or the prayer to a guardian angel (“Angel of God, my guardian dear...”). Or the Litany of Saints – petition after petition addressed to the saints by name, asking for their prayers and help. All of these are prayers and acts of devotion – addressed to the saints. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is quite explicit in talking about praying to Mary, and cites the Hail Mary as the best example (2675, 2676). Some people can be quite disturbed by this realisation: many are under the misapprehension that prayer can only be addressed to God himself – and therefore that if we pray to someone *other* than God, this must be a form of idolatry, treating the saints as if they were equal to God.

Be very careful of starting to think this way, because it is an easy step to take, but it is definitely and definitively NOT the teaching of the Catholic Church. It is a way of thinking that flows from two common misunderstandings: if we can remain clear about these two in our minds, we will preserve ourselves from falling into this very common misconception:

1. ***The mistake of thinking that prayer is petition and nothing more.*** If we think that prayer is just about asking for things, then when we ask one person or another we are implying that either one of them is a potential source of the gift. SO, for instance, if our parish needed more money (to repair the Church roof, say) I could appeal to the diocesan finance office for a loan or I could go to the bank. *Both* have the money I need and either one could help me out, independently of the other. BUT this is not what we say about God and the saints – they are not two separate sources of help but two different ways of applying for the same help – God’s. When the saints help us, it is God’s grace they bring us, not their own (just as when you help me, it is God who is helping me – through you). In addition to this, we have the whole issue of what prayer is all about – is it simply the way that we ask for and obtain spiritual gifts? If so, then there is no difference between the saints and God – BUT AS CATHOLICS WE DON’T SEE PRAYER LIKE THAT. Prayer is much more than asking for things - it is about CATS or ACTS: Contrition, Adoration, Thanksgiving and only *then* about Supplication. In other words, we don't pray primarily for what *we* can get out of it, but instead for what we can *give*: prayer is about the relationship we have with God and his whole Body (the mystical Body of Christ, esp. the Church Triumphant - the saints in Heaven). If we remember this, we have ensured that we do not equate God with the saints: for, after all, who would in their right mind, claim that every time we gave a gift to a friend we were communicating on each occasion exactly the same degree of friendship and affection? I might give the same book to my mother and to my brother for Christmas, but no one would say that this meant that my relationship with these two individuals must therefore be the same, or that I regarded mother and brother as alternatives or substitutes

for each other. Prayer is about adoration and thanksgiving more than about supplication: and we do not adore all people with the same intensity. Furthermore, we need to hold fast to our firm belief that the reason why we praise and revere the saints is because we praise in them what God has given them. We are only revering the saints because we see in them what we praise and revere in God - and that is **GOD'S HOLINESS**. *To praise the saints is to appreciate that it is God alone who has made them praiseworthy and that it is God, whose power is so powerfully present in the saints, whom we praise.*

2. **The mistake of thinking that all prayers are acts of worship.** This flows from the last point. Actually, it is a common way of thinking, but on closer inspection is absolutely ridiculous. We all know that many words are used in different circumstances to mean different things - the word “love” covers a variety of types of relationship (friend, relative, acquaintance, spouse, child, pet, chocolate, etc.,) each of which has its own unique character and mode of expression. The same is true of prayer - it is a relationship-term and like “love”, it implies different relationships with different individuals. We are simply saying that prayer to God is NOT the same as prayer to the saints, angels or Our Lady (just as love of my dog is NOT the same as love of my wife, my car or my hamster – or so I would hope!) From the earliest times, the Church has distinguished three different types of prayer, which unfortunately have only approximate translations into English. To the saints and angels, Christians have always offered **DULIA**. This really means  **veneration**: a form of praise which recognises in the saints the Christian virtues which we are struggling to perfect out of love for God, and which gives honour to them because they have opened themselves to God and emptied themselves of those selfish characteristics which pulled them away from God. It is a form of praise, which is at root the recognition that GOD has made them great - and therefore because God HAS made them great, we praise the greatness that God has given them. The second form, offered only to the Blessed Virgin Mary, we call **HYPHER-DULIA** - this is no more than a greater form of “dulia” (holiness-veneration) that we give to the saints. We recognise that in all creation God has not given so much honour to any as he has to Mary: and because GOD singled her out for such honour, to her we give that honour. Yet it is still the praise we give to a creature, not to the creator: it recognises that we are honouring one whom God has honoured. The third form is utterly different and is only offered to God. While the saints and angels receive honour and veneration, God (*and God alone*) receives **LATRIA – worship (i.e., sacrifice)**. All these take the form of prayer, but only one of these is offered exclusively to God: only God receives prayer in the form of **sacrifice**, and this is why the Mass, the sacrifice of the New Covenant is **ONLY OFFERED TO GOD**. In the early Church many of the martyrs were killed because they refused to burn incense to an image of a pagan idol - this was considered a sacrifice, and sacrifice is the one thing that may only be offered to God himself.

This being so, why do so many people think that prayer may only be offered to God - and that to offer prayer to the saints somehow detracts from God's glory or (even worse) makes the saints out to be equals with God or alternatives to God)? Quite simply because for Protestants of the Reformation, there is nothing else to give to God other than prayer: at the Reformation, the sacrifice of the Mass was rejected. They

argued that the Mass was NOT a sacrifice - thus there is no sacrifice to give to God, no *Latria* that only he receives. All that is left are the other forms of adoration (*dulia* and *hyper-dulia*): these, they argued, were the only forms of worship allowable in the New Testament, and they could be offered exclusively to God. This was an entirely new and unheard-of way to understand prayer. Now, Protestants looked on all forms of praying as *worship* and this can only be given to God. This new, and I must say rather confused, belief that they adopted meant that they completely misunderstood what Catholics were doing when they prayed to the saints and to Our Lady. The Protestants looked on these prayers suddenly as *worship* and they reached the conclusion that Catholics were treating the saints as though they were gods. While Protestants offered all prayers to God alone, they looked over at the Catholic Church to see us offering *dulia* and *hyper-dulia* to the saints as we had always done from the early Church. What the Protestants had decided ought to be reserved exclusively for God, they found Catholics giving to the saints. For the first time, venerating the saints seemed like idolatry.

One last word - remember the golden rule of prayer: pray as you can, not as you can't. Pray in the style of Christian prayer that suits you, not just because other people find it helpful!

Fr Guy de Gaynesford