

A CONCEPT OF PRAYER

By BRO. ALOYSIUS GEORGES, O. P.



HERE is a touching scene in the tragedy of "Hamlet," when the king with his sin-stained soul rises from his knees discouraged and thus laments :

"My words fly up, my thoughts remain below;
Words without thoughts never to heaven go."

Claudius, the king, had tried to pray and failed. Many of us have had the self same experience. We have tried to pray and found ourselves mumbling words, words without thought content. We have found ourselves far from God and yet we intended to pray.

People say at times: When I pray I kneel down before God; I banish everything else and I speak to Him; I suppress three-fourths of my everyday vocabulary; I search out the rarest words and I avoid mentioning common things; I intend to be quite other than I am. What shadows we are and what follies we pursue! Catholics know that the God of each of our days interests Himself in the most trivial events of our daily life; in our most prosaic occupations and little worries. He moves about them all just as He moved among the dull-eyed children of Nazareth, the simple country folk of Gallilee and the proud and haughty rulers of Palestine, sowing the good tidings of His beatitudes.

But by the mere fact that the conventional observances which so often surround prayer have been chosen beforehand, a cold shadow is cast at times over our devotions and they are shrouded with a vague feeling of insincerity. Not having dared in their dealings with God to be what God made them, many a soul debars itself from the sweetness and solace of prayer. A sort of scrupulous anxiety to be fastidiously correct has overthrown the generous impulses of their nature. They have not dared to approach their God without reserve, and to put their trust in Him, Who is their Maker. Their fear seems to be lest they should violate the prescriptions of some studied and unnatural rubric of their own mind.

The result of such prayer is pathetic. Since they are not true to themselves, they are merely acting. Outwardly they are full of courtesy, but within full of self, hard and domineering. Never do they lean or rest upon God in complete abandonment. The good desires of their souls are all entangled with human eagerness and even when they are willing to break through this reserve, their impetuosity carries them far beyond their simple goal. And so when they should be communing with God they are still struggling with themselves.

Thus it is that the prayers of many a soul fail to measure up to the very definition of prayer as given by St. John Damascene, and placed on our lips in the words of the little catechism: prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God. The great St. Thomas Aquinas points out three component elements or processes in prayer, all of which combine to form one simple act of true prayer (IIa IIae: Q. 180, A. 3). He notes that first of all we must accept as basic and fundamental certain important truths or principles regarding God to Whom we pray, such, for example, as "God is good," "God is merciful," "God rewards according to merit," "God is supreme, the first beginning, the last end of man," and the like. Unless we confidently believe and accept such truths as these, unreasonable would be all prayer to God. The second element or process in the act of prayer is what the Angelic Doctor designates as a deduction or drawing out from these accepted principles certain closely related truths regarding the particular object for which we pray. Having, for example, accepted the above principles regarding God, we deduce that He will show His mercy and kindness to us, providing that we are rightly disposed to receive it. And lastly, in the third process or element of prayer we form definite conclusions as to what we can pray for, how we should pray for it, and how we can best dispose ourselves to receive it. Our reason naturally leads to these conclusions, and it is in this final analysis that will be found the simple gaze or contemplation of truth,—in short, true prayer. This analysis of the process of true prayer is not suggested merely for the sake of dry speculation, but for a better understanding of the elements of true contemplation and prayer. St. Thomas Aquinas merely presents here a little scheme or formula whereby a knowledge of true prayer can be acquired.

We must not imagine that prayer is an abstract science or art, but rather a comforting handicraft of life. In prayer it would

be folly to prearrange in order, however elaborate, article after article of our faith. The medievals said: "God takes no delight in logic," that is, there is no prayer, no union with God, if we merely register our knowledge of Him or remember it in every particular. For we could weave such theological fabric and outlines of truth without the heart ever being inflamed with divine love. Prayer means that in the act of thinking of Him, we find Him so good, so kind and lovable that we yearn for His company and friendship.

Hence there is no need of an over-studied preparation for prayer. When we pray we must not cease to be ourselves. We remember from our first catechism that man is an animal endowed with reason. If we understand what we really are and look upon God as Our Father, as He taught us to do, we would pray to Him in a manner conformed to our nature. We are but thinking animals and we should ever bear this in mind that we may humble our self esteem. Still God wished to be adored and loved by animals endowed with reason, sensation and affection. If my temperament is emotional, my prayers should be lively and effusive; if by temperament I am cold and reserved, what good would there be in attempting to use sublime or rapturous language? The sooner we learn to be ourselves when we pray, the better for our peace of soul. Just as forced labor is doubly irksome, so unsuitable prayers irritate the soul. The prayers of another unless adaptable to our nature will either be arid or full of bombast; in any case they will cramp our devotion. Our prayers then should be our own and suitable to our individuality.

Still the best of us, because of distractions, cannot remain absorbed in prayer for any lengthy period. Some find a half hour troublesome and are constantly annoyed, when they consider how interruptedly and disorderly that half hour really is passed. Scarcely have we settled down to our devotions, when we find our mind roaming. Perhaps after a short time we discover that instead of praying we have wandered through many anxieties, hopes and ambitions. Again we resume our attempt to get into conversation with God. All this is tedious and distressing, but nothing more. We are sure to find it annoying, but distractions in themselves are not sinful. For sin implies deliberation and forethought, which are obviously lacking in such cases. We have then to be patient under our cross and spir-

itual dryness; but never must we in sheer disgust abandon our attempt to raise our hearts to God. For as Cowper tells us:

“Satan trembles when he sees
The weakest saint upon his knees.”

God looks at both our intentions and efforts when we pray. We learn from Thomas a’Kempis that the Divine Master considers more the love of the giver than the gift of the lover;—the love with which we do a thing rather than the thing we do. When involuntary distractions come, one must not yield or give way to discouragement. As long as we are willing to pray and to make the attempt, there is hope of progress in prayer. God has created our human nature and it is He Who knows the struggle we are making. He assumed this nature out of love for us; He walked with us in this life for a score and thirteen years. God sees all things; He has lived our life and understands us better than we do ourselves. How few of our closest friends “know half the reason why we smile or sigh” (Keble). Yet God knows and does not allow anything to pass unseen. He looks at our efforts; man considers the results, the outcome. We are safe and secure in our attempts at prayer. Let us pray on.

But some may argue that they have prayed for years and have never been answered. This is a hackneyed and fantailed argument against perseverance in prayer which merely indicates that such a person is not acquainted with a basic principle of his religion. For the testimony of Scripture and the Fathers it cannot be doubted that prayer is infallibly efficacious, when three conditions are fulfilled. We read in the Book of Ecclesiasticus XXXV-21; “The prayer of him that humbleth himself, shall pierce the clouds; and till it come nigh he will not be comforted; and he will not depart till the Most High behold.” Our Lord Himself tells us; “Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be given to you.” Math. VII-7. Again St. Hilary insists; “It is our most consoling doctrine that God hears our prayers and is merciful.”

Hence to doubt the efficacy of prayer is not only unchristian, but most pernicious to piety and faith. If in our prayers and petitions to a merciful and all-provident God we ask and desire that alone which, proximately or remotely, shall be conducive to our eternal salvation, and if we have disposed ourselves with humility and resignation to accept His good pleasure and will in

what we ask, we may rest assured that we have not prayed in vain, knowing, with St. John (I John: V-14) "that whatsoever we shall ask according to His will, He heareth us."

So much for the object of our prayer, and the dispositions with which we should make it. A third, and very important condition of prayer is that he who would invoke heaven should be in the state of grace, humble, confident, persevering and sincere, if his prayer is to be efficacious. It must be remembered however, that though we be the most abject sinners, bearing in our scarlet souls the deadliest of mortal sins, if we but whisper as did the leper, "Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean," we shall be heard, and shall obtain the grace of conversation. When we are already in the state of grace, if our prayers are to be infallibly efficacious, we must ask what is reasonable, just and conformable to our eternal salvation; we must approach Him with dispositions of humility, charity, contrition and sincerity; and finally, like the woman of Chanaan (Math. XV-22), we must persevere in prayer unto the end, confident that we shall hear the blessed answer she received from His sacred lips: "Great is thy faith; be it done to thee as thou wilt."

Nor are our prayers ever in vain or wasted. We may forget the many times we have besought God to hear us, but He never forgets. Looking back, we realize that we were repaid in gifts we never thought of receiving, much less asking. That which we then asked in the sorrow or stress of the moment,—how often have we thanked God for sending other blessings in its stead! But we know that we were heard; we know, too, that we shall always be heard when rightly disposed, for we have the infallible word of an unchangeable and eternal God: "Amen, amen I say unto you, if you ask the Father anything in My name, it shall be given to you." (John XVI-23).