

WHY PRAY?

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OF all the duties incumbent upon the sincere Catholic prayer is without doubt the most urgent. St. Paul himself insists upon this when he urges us to pray without ceasing. And St. Thomas, "the most learned of the saints and the most saintly of the learned," assures us that without prayer it is morally impossible for us either to attain salvation or to avert damnation. "After baptism," he says, "man needs to pray continually, in order to enter heaven."¹ Such expressions cannot but warn us of the seriousness of this obligation and we have only to consider the motives on which they are based to be fully convinced of their truth.

The first motive that should impress us is that which arises from the obedience due to the oft repeated injunctions of Jesus Christ. He has said: "Watch ye, therefore, praying at all times."² And again, "We ought always to pray, and not to faint."³ Time and time again does He try to impress each one of us with the absolute indispensability of prayer; no one who has reached the age of reason is exempt. It seems as though Christ cannot call it to our attention too frequently. Everywhere in the Gospels He stresses its importance. Utterances so strong and earnest as these cannot fail to make us realize that prayer is an absolute necessity.

But Christ did not stop at preaching this doctrine; He set an example for all of us by practicing it Himself. He was not content with teaching and encouraging others to pray, but He felt it incumbent upon Himself to show us the way. We have only to read the Gospels for confirmation of this statement. Although interiorly possessing the beatific vision at all times, He did not hesitate to pray externally and to practice all manner of prayer. His whole life was one of constant and uninterrupted communion with His Father. It was not necessary that He

¹ *Summa Theologica*, IIIa, q. 39 a. 5.

² Luke, xxi, 36.

³ Luke, xviii, 1.

do this for Himself; He was God. He prayed for us and whatever we possess was obtained by the intercession of His prayers. He prayed that He might emphasize the fact that we too must pray; that His example might be understood as a command.

Christ's commands alone are sufficient to bring us to a full realization of the obligation that devolves upon us to pray. But to go further and say that even if He had not issued explicit instructions in this regard we would still be obliged to adore Him, to thank Him for His beneficence, and to make known to Him our wants, would only be insisting upon what the Church has always taught and ever will teach. Religion itself demands this of us and prayer is nothing more than these acts of worship. Justice demands that we render to each man whatever is his due, and the virtue of religion, as a part of justice, that we give to God, in so far as we can, that worship and honor which belongs to Him as the First Cause, the Final End, and the Preserver of all things. We honor a learned man because of his proficiency in some branch of knowledge; the physician, because of his ability to help us; the brave man, because of some heroic deed he has performed. Yet God is entitled to a far greater homage and love than any of these men. He is our Creator. He preserves us in our existence by a continual act of His creative power. He is our Father and Benefactor, the Font from which all our graces and blessings have come. Each one of us is dependent upon His sovereign goodness. All of us are His debtors and consequently all of us must manifest this dependence upon Him by acts of religion, chief among which, according to St. Thomas, is prayer. "By praying man surrenders his mind to God, since he subjects it to Him with reverence, and so to speak, presents it to Him. Wherefore just as the human mind excels exterior things, whether bodily members, or those external things that are employed for God's service, so too, prayer surpasses other acts of religion."⁴

The saints realized this and their lives bear glowing testimony to this truth. They recognized prayer as an indispensable means for meriting eternal life. If these heroic souls were so faithful in its practice, how can we afford to be so careless? By bowing down before God in adoration, by thanking Him for His favors, by humbling ourselves and becoming even as little

⁴ *op cit.* IIa IIae q. 83 a. 3 ad 3um.

children, we confess Him to be our Lord and Master. But to fail in the performance of this act of religious worship would be not only the basest ingratitude but even apostasy from God Himself.

Finally, charity itself would demand this of us. Poor, weak creatures that we are, what can we do without God's aid? What meritorious act can we ourselves perform that would entitle us to the high reward which He has promised to us? Life is a perpetual struggle and a constant warfare; enemies beset us on all sides, and, unless God comes to our assistance, we are doomed. Of our own strength we cannot overcome its many difficulties. Even as the helpless babe needs the constant and loving attention of those who surround it, so, too, do we require the continuous protection of God's all-saving grace.

Not only are we helpless but we are unequipped for life's struggle. What would we think of an officer who commanded his soldiers to capture an enemy's position but failed to arm them for the ensuing conflict? Yet how often have not we been guilty of a like offense! In trusting to our own strength to overcome temptations we are rashly exposing ourselves to the withering fire of the enemies of our souls. Within and without we are laying ourselves open to the merciless attacks of relentless foes. To resist these assaults does not lie within our power; human nature alone is not equal to such a task. Our succour can come only from one source—from God alone. Left to ourselves we would be helpless. Like a rudderless vessel in a storm we would become the victims of our own evil inclinations to be tossed about upon a sea of sin and to perish finally amidst the rocks of eternal damnation.

Since then our faith teaches us that without God's grace we can do nothing, charity obliges us to do all in our power to obtain this assistance. And, if we are to accept the teachings of the Holy Doctors, prayer is the ordinary means whereby we may receive this aid. This is the teaching of St. Augustine. "We believe," he says, "that none can start upon the road to salvation unless invited by the preventient grace of God; that no one pursues the path and works out his salvation, unless encouraged by the helping grace of God; that no one can merit or receive such graces and such helps, except by means of supplication and constant petition."⁵ And St. John Chrysostom implies the same

⁵ J. B. Scaramelli, S. J., *Directorium Asceticum* (London, 1917) Vol. 1, p. 210.

when he says, "Take a fish out of water and shortly you will see it expire under your very eyes. In like manner, cease, yourself, from prayers, you too will soon die to grace and to God; for what water is to the bodily life of a fish, that prayer is to man's spiritual life."⁶

God sees all and knows all but He desires that we seek His aid in prayers. He has said: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For every one that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened."⁷ Nothing could be more expressive of His wish. If we are to receive His grace and His helps, we must seek them in prayer, "that we may impetrate," as St. Thomas says, "what God has disposed to be fulfilled by our prayers; in other words 'that by asking, man may deserve to receive what Almighty God from all eternity has disposed to give,' as Gregory says."⁸ True it is that many times He has showered His gifts upon us without any petition on our part, but as the Angelic Doctor again remarks, "God bestows many things on us out of His liberality, even without our asking for them: but that He wishes to bestow certain things on us at our own asking, is for the sake of our own good, namely, that we may acquire confidence in having recourse to God, and that we may recognize in Him the Author of our good."⁹

⁶ *ibid.* p. 211

⁷ Luke, xi, 9-10.

⁸ *op. cit.*, IIa IIae q. 83 a. 2

⁹ *op. cit.*, IIa IIae q. 83 a. 2 ad 3um

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