

PRAYER—THE PATH TO PEACE

CLEMENT McKENNA, O.P.



ANYONE taking a comprehensive glance at the chaotic condition of the world at the present time, and seeing the mass murders being committed in the name of patriotism and heroism, is quite baffled to find a suitable explanation for it all. Is this muddled condition what God intended when He created the world? If it is, then we can say that God is an enigma. If, however, the state of things today is contrary to what the Creator wished, what caused the disruption of the Divine Plan? The answer is simple: man has tried to assert his complete independence of God, and in so doing has brought upon his own head all the evil consequences of war and moral degradation. He has tried to divorce the spiritual from the material, and the climax has been in the outright denial of the spiritual.

The trouble first started when prayer was rendered suspect. "Why," men asked themselves, "should I have to curry favor with God through prayer, when I am capable of obtaining everything that I need through my own work and ingenuity. Prayer may be necessary for those whom God has not gifted so highly, but certainly not for me; I am not dependent on anything or anybody. Whatever I want, I'll work for; if I work hard enough, I'll get it; if not, I won't obtain it." This is the attitude of many in the world today, whether they express it in these words or not, whether they recognize their position or not, whether they want to recognize their position or not. They have divorced prayer from work, have placed them at opposite poles with no medium through which they may be joined.

What distorted notions of both prayer and work! The latter, for them, is merely manual toil which will bring them material gain in the form of money which, in turn, will further them in social preferment and secure for them an abundance of luxury. Prayer, on the other hand, is ". . . a weakness, a cowardice, something unworthy of God and man; a case of God playing favorites, or of men trying to load the dice with which they play the game of life."¹ Hence for them, self-dependent beings that they think themselves to be, prayer

¹ Farrell, Walter, O.P., *A Companion to the Summa*, Vol. III, p. 261. Sheed and Ward, N. Y., 1940.

and work are absolutely incompatible. It is either one or the other, but not both. Prayer is perfectly all right for cloistered monks and nuns, or for the feeble and crippled; work is for the strong and capable, for those who depend on no outside help, divine or human.

The truth is that prayer and work are not separable. They "do not replace each other, nor are they aside of each other, separated in time and space as material things are."² They are, indeed, closely allied to one another, nor can one be effective without the other. God, in His infinite Wisdom, never intended to set up two absolutely diverse orders, one of which was to include those who prayed only and did not work, the other to include those who worked only and did not pray. Rather did He intend the fusion of prayer and work into such a union that those who worked, likewise prayed; and those who prayed, worked. When every work becomes a prayer, and every prayer becomes a work, then only will the precept of Christ to "pray always!"³ be fulfilled; then only will man be truly successful in the business of living his life. For a man may be judged very successful according to the standards set up by the world, he may be a leader in finance or politics; but if he has become so absorbed in his work that he forgets to thank Him Who has made this success possible, his life is a complete failure.

In its simplest meaning, prayer is the acknowledgment by man of his dependence on God. It is very true that ". . . in no other act does man so strictly tell the truth about himself as in prayer. Every prayer . . . is a statement of our needs (at least implicit); and the very multiplication of our requests is an emphasizing of the fact that it is God Who is the source of all good."⁴ Hence when man admits that of himself he can do nothing, and seeks help from Him Who wants to help, it is certain that the results will be perfect. God has so decreed that in the production of things definite instruments be used. He is in Himself capable of producing anything without the help of creatures, but He has determined that all things should be effected through the use of tools. The sculptor's chisel, an artist's brush, a giant dynamo—these are all instruments in producing either a statue, or a picture, or electricity. They are called secondary causes, while God alone is the primary cause. So too "prayer is among those things that have been knighted, admitted to the noble order of causes to share something in the causality of God. Prayer fulfills the con-

² Elbert, John, S.M., *Prayer in a Modern Age*, p. 177. Catholic Literary Guild, 1941.

³ St. Luke, XVIII, 1.

⁴ Farrell, *A Companion to the Summa*, Vol. III, p. 261.

dition laid down by divine wisdom for the production of this particular effect,"⁵ just as the artist's brush fulfills the condition for the production of a picture. Paradoxical as it may be, anyone who would try to paint a picture without the proper tool would be considered insane, yet those who deny the necessity of prayer as a proper tool, are hailed as "liberators of reason." They fail to recognize the fact that God has laid down the condition that only through prayer will certain results be obtained.

The completely confused state of the world today is a startling example of man's attempted revolt from God. It is as if God has abandoned man and left him to follow his own whims. This cannot be, since God is good and provident, and He has determined the time when that peace will return which is the tranquillity of order. Yet He has likewise determined that this peace can only be obtained by the universal confession by man to God that He alone is supreme, and that man is, after all, only a creature who is completely dependent on God. Once this act of homage is made, the way is open for further petitions, which are the necessary conditions for obtaining anything from God. Our needs and our smallest desires are all known to God before we ask Him, yet He has determined that we should ask: "Ask, and it shall be given to you."⁶ Nor do prayers change God, but merely fulfill the necessary condition laid down by Him; prayer enobles the work of man, and incorporates man himself into the workings of divine Providence.

The Benedictine adage: *Ora et Labora—Pray and Work*, is the perfect motto in the life of every man. With this before his eyes, and in his mind the prayer with which the priest begins the Mass, "*Actiones nostras: . . . that every prayer and work of ours may begin from Thee, and by Thee be happily ended,*" he will not fail to see the necessity of both prayer and work. It will be evident that one without the other is futile; but when both are present, the result will be peace—that peace which the world cannot give, and which is but a pleasant foretaste of that never-ending peace which man will enjoy in the presence of Eternal Peace.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁶ St. Luke, XI, 9.