

## LET US PRAY

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HE grandeur and majesty of the Roman Catacombs inspire awe; about nine hundred miles of tunnels and tombs echo from the distant past the tremendous power of the Gospel. Guided by the light of supernatural faith, the early Christians burrowed into the darkness of the earth and gouged out their gigantic "*Credo*" in the Son of God, in His Church and more especially in the communion of saints and in the power of prayer. The rays of the sun did not penetrate to their city but Christ illumined their minds and inflamed their hearts as they offered up the Holy Sacrifice and poured forth their prayers.

Saint Paul preached the same Gospel to the Greek philosophers at the Areopagus, but they shut their eyes to the light. Most of them did not pray; many scoffed at prayer. They argued daily, trying to find the answer to life and its riddles; but, turning aside from the beacon of faith and groping with dimmed intellects, most of them found but small fragments of the truth. Down through the centuries there were always some who ridiculed prayer and many more who never took it seriously. Today, who can number the multitude who never open their lips or hearts to their heavenly Father in prayer?

But the Christian of the Catacombs and the Christian of today have good reason to pray. Has not the Son of God prayed and taught His disciples to pray? Has not Peter, the vicar of Christ, prayed and asked prayers? Did not the Old Law and the Prophets exhort the people to pray? Do not the saints and martyrs pray continually? Those who ridicule prayer are wise in their own conceits, but despise the "foolishness" of God.

Sometimes we wonder how men can wander so far from the truth. We must remember, however, that the pathway of truth is a narrow one, flanked by many misleading by-paths, often soaring in steep inclines. With the lamp of faith, the road is

clear; without this lamp it is easy to follow trails that twist and turn into various entanglements of error.

Some do not pray because they think our affairs are not governed by Divine Providence. If God is not interested in His creatures, why pray? Not a few philosophers and scientists in all ages fell into this attitude because they were staggered by the indescribable and unfathomable immensity of the universe. In comparison, our own earth is such a tiny speck, and man fades into still further insignificance. But they forgot that man is more than body, that he has a spiritual soul, a soul that is not material, not composed of matter, but of a higher order. They forgot that man has ideas, concepts, knowledge. He can pierce the bounds of this finite universe and know its Creator, the Infinite. He is made to the image and likeness of God Himself, and is ordained to eternal union with his Creator. They forgot that the Creator of the Universe sent His Son to this earth in order to redeem men and to give them eternal life.

Others, seeing the struggles and tragedies in the animal kingdom and other defects in nature, conclude that God has no care for these things. They do not consider that God desires the good of the whole universe and allows particular goods to be sacrificed to the order and beauty of the whole. It must be remembered further that God cursed the earth as a punishment for man's sin.

The evils and miseries of men seem to argue that God does not care overmuch for His creatures. Enormous calamities, plagues, diseases and pain have been man's lot. The sins of mankind seem to challenge the very power and patience of God. But man as he came from the hand of God was free from sufferings and death. He lost his wonderful gifts only because he rebelled against his Maker. So too, who can number the evils man heaps upon his own head because he rebels against God's law? Physical evils have their place in the divine plan. They may lead to eternal life where God will restore above measure. Sin, the work of man, is the evil that is most terrible, because it cuts us off from God and leads to an eternity of despair and suffering. Seen through our narrow, limited and blurred vision, the skeins of life seem to be hopelessly tangled; but viewed from eternal heights and in the light of eternal reward and punishment the focus becomes clearer, and we begin to trace the pattern of God's goodness and providence.

That God rules and governs the universe is clear from the fact that He is the first cause of all things and His power is all-embracing. It extends to every creature and to every act of every creature. He created them and ordained them to their end. He sustains them in every moment of their existence. God has provided especially for man by ordaining the inferior creatures, the animal and vegetable kingdoms, to man's dominion and service. Furthermore, no creature, neither man nor angel, can exercise its powers without God's influence. Nothing happens without God's activity and permission. "Yea, the very hairs of your head are all numbered." In the case of man, God moves him in a special manner by His grace, so that he may attain his supernatural end, the vision of God. We must measure God's love and providence by the fact that He sent His Son to liberate men from sin and to open the gates of heaven by sacrificing Himself. With Saint Paul, the Christian exclaims: ". . . to them that love God, all things work together unto good." We cannot say that it is useless to pray because God does not care about us.

Others take this attitude. God's will is unchangeable. His eternal decrees will be carried out. My little prayers cannot change His plans; why should I pray? As will be shown a little later, however, we do not ask God to change His plans when we pray. Again, others claim that since God's will is unchangeable it forces all things to act according to its decrees; that man has no free will. If such were the case, prayer would have no power, it would not merit any answer. That God's will is unchangeable is most certain, for God is infinitely perfect, not subject to change or imperfection. This does not mean that He destroys our free will. God arranges some things to happen of necessity; He arranges other things to come about by means of free agents. It would be foolish for God to equip His creatures with free will and then strip them of this power by forcing them to act against that will.

Those who maintain that the heavenly bodies, or that physical, chemical or biological changes, or the whole environment of man control his actions so as to rob him of free will, also reject the power of prayer. If all things happen necessarily as a result of these changes and environment, prayer would be but another mechanical reflex, and would have no more merit in God's sight than a waterfall. That the heavenly bodies influence our lives to a great extent no one wishes to deny. We can

readily imagine what would happen if the warmth and light of the sun were taken from us. It is easy to see how the weather disposes us to act in various ways according to our temperaments; how heat, cold, rain, fog and the other conditions resulting from the influence of the stars and planets can play upon an individual make-up. That chemical, physical and biological activities form the basis of man's material structure is equally evident. We also know that physical characteristics and their dispositions to character traits are inherited by children from their progenitors. To affirm, however, that these causes absolutely determine every single action of man is contrary to common sense and every day experience. Man's soul is immaterial and its powers are above those of matter. Free will and intelligence are powers that cannot be absolutely subject to material influences. The heavenly bodies, man's environment, the interaction and succession of causes may incline a man to act along certain lines, but they can be resisted and are resisted. Furthermore, as we look about us today and view the marvels which science has wrought, we realize that man can control and enslave nature for his service. He can and does interrupt the ordinary course of material nature. Therefore, since man is free and all things do not happen through blind necessity or an inexorable fate, prayer cannot be discarded on this score.

There are others who admit that all things are subject to Divine Providence and that prayers have influence with God, but who err by saying that the dispositions of God's Providence are changeable. In other words, when a man asks God for anything, God will change His plans if necessary, in order to answer this prayer. This cannot be, as we have seen that God's will is unchangeable. The true solution of how prayer is useful must take into account the fact that God does not change the decrees of His Providence, nor does He force men to fulfill His will.

How can we harmonize God's immutable Providence with the power of prayer? Saint Thomas answers very briefly and very clearly. Divine Providence disposes not only what events will take place, but also from what causes and in what order. In other words, God Who is infinite in power and knowledge foresees all things great and small. He foresees how all things will happen, whether through the natural laws He established, or from the succession and interaction of causes, or from the free will of man or angel. But among other causes is included prayer.

Thus we pray not because we wish to change God's will, but to fulfill the conditions under which God has preordained we should receive that for which we ask. God foresaw from all eternity our prayers and so disposed affairs that they might be answered if He saw fit. God foresaw from all eternity that men would need help to save their souls; He also realized that they would need many temporal goods; and since He commanded them to pray, He arranged His plans with this in mind. Thus by praying we fulfill the conditions God has laid down that our prayers be answered. Saint Gregory states it nicely: "Men by the very act of petitioning God, merit to receive what the Omnipotent God has disposed to give them from all eternity."

In many places Holy Scripture tells us that God has ordained that prayers act as secondary causes in obtaining the good we need from Him. The Son of God Himself confirms us in this position. He has expressed Himself in very strong language when speaking of prayer. "Pray, that ye enter not into temptation." "And all things whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive." "Ask and you shall receive." The vast majority of men admit they need help to attain salvation and to support the trials and burdens of this life. The natural desire to turn to the Almighty Creator and Governor of the universe is not a vain vapor of disordered nerves, nor a futile expression of anguish, but a reasonable action based on solid principles. God wants to help us and wishes us to ask Him for help. If He does not take away our misery, He will give us strength to bear our cross as He gave His Son strength to bear His.

Besides the wonderful power prayer has with God, it also has other good effects on us. When we pray we realize that we depend on God for all things. We do not tell God anything new, since He knows what we are about to ask before we ask it; but by praying we impress on ourselves our utter helplessness and His boundless generosity. Nor can we say it would be more generous for the Almighty and All-good God to provide for our every need without any effort on our part. His infinite mercy considers our frailty. There is the danger that we would not appreciate His gifts if they came without effort of ours. In fact, do we not forget how many gifts He has showered on us, altogether without our asking? How many times do we thank Him for creating us a "little less than angels"; for sending us His Son to be our Redeemer; for raising us up to be His adopted sons through Baptism? He wants us to pray to Him because

we then learn to go to Him with confidence; because we appreciate more fully how He is the source of all goodness. Saint Chrysostom says it is a wonderful happiness and glory for man to converse with God, to speak with Christ; to desire what He wishes and to ask what He desires.

Recalling these thoughts to mind from time to time we can enter more deeply into the spirit of the Church. We will be attentive and fervent when we say with her: "Let us pray! O God, whose providence in its ordering faileth not; we humbly beseech Thee, that whatever is harmful Thou mayst withhold, and whatever is helpful, Thou mayst bestow. Through Christ our Lord. Amen."