

THOUGHTS FROM THE RHINELAND

PHILOSOPHERS AT PRAYER

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Pierre Hadot argues in *What is Ancient Philosophy?* that in the ancient world philosophical discourse was not a mere external evaluation of philosophical claims, but that it constituted a way of life. In fact, Hadot argues that for many ancient philosophers, this way of life constituted spiritual exercises. He writes,

By this term, I mean practices which could be physical, as in dietary regimes, or discursive, as in dialogue and meditation, or intuitive, as in contemplation, but which were all intended to effect a modification and a transformation in the subject who practiced them. The philosophy teacher's discourse could also assume the form of a spiritual exercise, if the discourse were presented in such a way that the disciple, as auditor, reader, or interlocutor, could make spiritual progress and transform himself within.

The ancient thinkers may have practiced spiritual exercises, but prayer considered in the light of Revelation is a different matter altogether.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines prayer thusly:

“Great is the mystery of the faith!” The Church professes this mystery in the Apostles’ Creed and celebrates it in the sacramental liturgy, so that the life of the faithful may be conformed to Christ in the Holy Spirit to the glory of God the Father. This mystery, then, requires that the faithful believe in it, that they celebrate it and that they live from it in a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God. This relationship is prayer (2558).

Properly Christian prayer requires the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. It demands a belief in the saving words of the Gospel, expects that one may attain eternal life in heaven, and has deeper friendship with God as its goal. The cardinal virtues of the Greeks are not sufficient for these ends. Nor can one believe, without the aid of Revelation, that communion with God is possible.

Prayer, it seems, is something purely theological. It would appear that the prayer of a philosopher *qua* philosopher is no longer possible with the Revelation of Jesus Christ. However, the Christian tradition and the witness of the Church’s saints shows that this is not the case. By examining three of the Church’s great philosophers, Justin Martyr, Albert the Great, and the Blessed Virgin Mary, one is able to explore three methods of Christian prayer particular to the philosopher.

JUSTIN MARTYR: THE INADEQUACY OF PHILOSOPHY TO FULFILL THE EXISTENTIAL VOID

When Eryximachus proposes at the beginning of *Symposium* that those gathered should discuss the topic of love, Socrates, who normally boasts of his ignorance, boldly claims: “I’m certainly not going to argue against it—I with my claim that the ways of love are all I understand.” Socrates understands love precisely because he is a philosopher, a lover of wisdom. Indeed, the whole of *Symposium* shows how love of wisdom leads one to contemplation of divine things.

The interplay between the desire for wisdom and the contemplation of the divine is borne out in the life of St. Justin Martyr. Justin describes his conversion to Christianity in his *Dialogue with Trypho*. In his search for truth, Justin explains that he joined no less than four philosophical schools: he first learned with a Stoic, but left him because of the Stoic's claim that self-knowledge is not necessary for philosophy; he spent a short time with a Peripatetic, but walked away when his teacher demanded a fee; he was turned away from the Pythagorians because of his ignorance of mathematics; finally, he found a home with the Platonists. Justin writes,

The perception of incorporeal things quite overwhelmed me and the Platonic theory of ideas added wings to my mind, so that in a short time I imagined myself a wise man. So great was my folly that I fully expected immediately to gaze upon God, for this is the goal of Plato's philosophy.

Shortly after discovering Platonism, Justin took his customary walk along the shore, his favorite place to think, whereupon he met an old man who opened the Scriptures to him and showed him that the one, true philosophy is Christianity.

It would be a mistake to think that, upon converting to Christianity, Justin discarded his Platonism as useless. Justin continued to use Greek philosophy to help explain the mysteries of the Faith, and retained his philosopher's clothing as he engaged pagans in debate. In fact, his *Dialogue with Trypho* is written in the form of a Platonic dialogue. Justin's conversion makes clear not that philosophy is useless, but that it is, by itself, inadequate. Platonism provided Justin with a foundation to begin answering the many questions he had—a foundation and nothing more. Platonism could not bring Justin's ultimate desires to rest; it could only bring him, as it were, to the old man at the seashore.

But is this not a great achievement? Philosophy can provide the Christian with a framework by which to begin answering deep

questions. In itself, it can never lead to the restful contemplation of eternal life, but the very inadequacy of philosophy compels the philosopher to gaze upon God who is the fullness of Truth. This represents the first paradigm by which a philosopher can pray.

ALBERT THE GREAT: THE MIND OF GOD REFLECTED IN NATURE

When one begins speaking of seeking God in nature, one might immediately think of the hymns of St. Francis or the countless stories told of his love for God's creatures. St. Albert the Great possessed the same reverence for nature as Francis, but differed from Francis insofar as his approach to nature was scientific. Albert writes, "The whole world is theology for us because the heavens proclaim the glory of God." This posture accounts for a famous story told of Albert: When another friar chided him for spending too much time studying natural philosophy and not theology, Albert simply gave him a dismissive blessing.

St. Albert's study of natural philosophy reveals a particular attitude about his approach to the world and, by extension, God. We appreciate Albert's approach all the more when it is compared to that of Francis Bacon, who advocated that man become the master of nature. Bacon bid his readers to subject Nature to their service. Bacon's approach, which had a particular impact on the modern scientific method, has also had a tremendous impact on the thinking of the layman in our own day.

Walker Percy observes in *Lost in the Cosmos*, "In a post-religious age, the only transcendence open to the self is self-transcendence, that is, the transcending of the world by the self. The available modes of transcendence in such an age are science and art." This is to say that in the modern world, where human beings have become disillusioned and bored with everyday life, they seek to transcend it by placing themselves above the natural order, studying it as a mere series of specimens and measurable phenomena.

St. Albert's approach stands in stark contrast to Bacon's. Whereas Bacon's philosophy advocates for the manipulation and mastery of nature, Albert's study necessitated the reception



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of nature as an independent object and ordered reality in which the human person has a place. For the one who follows Albert's method, God is seen in the ordering of nature. Thus, the study of nature becomes a form of prayer. In a sense, it is a window into the mind of God or Divine Providence. Consequently, the natural philosopher's study can lead him to a more intimate relationship with the Creator because, rather than attempting to transcend nature, he tries to understand his place within it.

THE BLESSED VIRGIN: NURTURING THE TRUTH AS A LIFELONG TASK

It may seem strange at first to list the Blessed Virgin as a philosopher in the Christian tradition. But in his encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio*, Bl. John Paul II does exactly this. The late pope writes, "For between the vocation of the Blessed Virgin and the vocation of true philosophy there is a deep harmony.... In her [the monks of Christian antiquity] saw a lucid image of true philosophy

and they were convinced of the need to *philosophari in Maria*.” What is it about Mary that connects her vocation with that of the philosopher? Fr. David Meconi, S.J., points out that in the ancient world women were sometimes used as models of philosophy, notably Boethius’s Lady Philosophy and Plato’s Diotima. He writes,

The ancients anticipate Mary as the model of philosophy by holding up the dynamics of impregnation, parturition, and sucking the truth as the paradigms by which the human knower comes to know what is.

Mary’s vocation overlaps with that of the philosopher in her motherly nurturing of Truth. She is not merely an open recipient of the Truth, but she keeps these things in her heart, meditating on them day and night. Mary nourishes the Truth she has received and comes to a fuller understanding of that Truth over the course of her life.

Philosophy is a difficult task and the pursuit of Truth must be dogged; it requires the complete dedication of the philosopher. He must read, think, and rethink philosophy as if it’s a full-time job. The same fidelity and dedication are required for prayer. Jacques Phillipe writes in his excellent book on prayer, *Time for God*,

Someone who sets out on a life of prayer should aim in the first place at fidelity. What matters is not whether our mental prayer is beautiful, or whether it works, or whether it is enriched by deep thoughts and feelings, but whether it is persevering and faithful.

The practice of philosophy as exemplified in the Virgin Mary develops the necessary habits for entering into fruitful prayer. Additionally, since the practice of philosophy in itself can lead to contemplation of divine things, albeit in a less perfect way than through theological truths, the practice of nourishing this

contemplation over time constitutes a form of prayer. The imitation of the Blessed Virgin then, constitutes the third paradigm.

Man is not only called to a natural end, but a supernatural one as well. Revelation and supernatural grace are the means to the supernatural end, and prayer is a supernatural gift—the Holy Spirit working through the one praying. These truths, however, do not preclude the philosopher from praying *qua* philosopher. As exemplified in the paradigms of Justin Martyr, Albert the Great, and the Blessed Virgin Mary, philosophy can lead one to prayer by showing the philosopher its own limitations, by leading him to see God reflected in the order of creation, and by instilling in him the *habitus* of constant truth-seeking.

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