

Father Matta El-Meskeen

Guidelines for Prayer



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Fr Matta El Meskeen

The Spiritual Father of the Monastery of St Macarius

GUIDELINES
FOR
PRAYER

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Guidelines for Prayer

Father Matta El-Meskeen

The Spiritual Father of the Monastery of St Macarius

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Contents

I. Christ waits for us	5
II. In the presence of God	7
III. “We are changed into the same image”	15
IV. Prayer for others	24
V. The Mystic’s Prayer Rite	33

I

CHRIST WAITS FOR US

WHenever we come before Christ earnestly seeking His will, ours meets with His and so we find mercy. The more often and sincerely we pray, the closer our will and His become.

Christ meets us in prayer and we come to know His will:

Unless we pray, Christ can never meet us, nor can we come to know His will. He waits for us to pray, and looks forward to it: 'behold, I stand at the door and knock' (Rev 3:20).

He declares in the Gospel the vital importance of prayer, urging us to pray at all times, tirelessly and ceaselessly. Why is this?

It is while we are in prayer that Christ can get in touch with us, make His will known to us and grant us His grace.

The reason that sin is abhorrent to the Father and grievous to His Son, is that it caused the cross and the excruciating agonies that were mercilessly inflicted upon the Lord by humankind.

But the moment the sinner stands before the Father, clinging to the cross and making his or her plea through the blood of Christ, his sin falls away. The condemnation that a person's sin deserved is lifted and its curse vanishes away from him. It is therefore appropriate to hold the cross and kiss it repeatedly during prayer.

Christ endured the cross for the joy set before Him, rejoicing in the salvation of men and their reconciliation with the Father. Christ continues to bear our sins willingly. Though it may recur repeatedly over the same day He continues to forgive our sin, as long as we repent every time with a contrite heart.

The suffering that He experienced and the fact that He went through with it even to the extent of dying is [eloquent] testimony to His readiness to bear all sins—without limit. For the frailty of human nature, the impotence of the human will and the disgrace of mankind are all laid bare before His heart.

It is for this reason that each of us should present ourselves prayerfully before Christ with the consciousness and humility of a sinner, bowing the head, beating the breast and soiling the forehead with the dust of the earth. Yet at the same time we should be confident of Christ's forgiveness, compassion and delight in us. The more pronounced our weaknesses, the more these qualities are enhanced.

II

IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

The mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ in our prayer:

Prayer is a great gift granted to man to bring him to God the Father through the mediation of Jesus Christ. In it there is an actual condescension on the part of God to co-exist with man on account of the Father's love for His Son Jesus Christ, who becomes present with us in His humility, according to His promise. The Holy Spirit paves the way for this invisible spiritual encounter by means of grace. This is why it is fitting to prostrate oneself repeatedly and with all reverence before the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit to honor the divine presence and express one's complete obedience to the Holy Trinity. Since we obtained these precious gifts, which include our acceptance, assurance and access to the Father through the cross, it is appropriate to kiss the cross in every prostration.

We begin our prayer with the words, 'In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' for He alone is worthy of worship. Then follows the doxology (i.e., Glory) as a praising of the Holy Trinity and a testimony of His entire divine presence. The Lord's prayer that follows should be addressed to the Father with all reverence, just as Abraham stood before God as if he were dust and ashes, with a sense of utter contrition.

Heaven cannot contain God, nor can the heaven of heavens, much less the earth. Yet he enters and rests in the penitent soul, i.e. the soul which practices repentance. For the soul is but a whiff of His breath, that is of His Spirit. Just as the soul yearns for her Creator, so the Creator yearns for His creation—which came through His Spirit. So we should be careful during prayer not to conceive of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as in any way

outside us or visible to the eye. For God is present not outside but inside the soul that senses Him—although it does not see Him: ‘pray to your Father who is in secret’ (Matt 6:6).

Dread of God, anguish from frequent sinning, or doubts resulting from tribulations or illnesses, make us insensitive to the presence of God. But this does not mean that God is not present then during prayer. Whenever a person begins a contrite prayer, God can never shun him: the love of God is not put off by the sins of the penitent sinner, or his impurity or doubts. For God’s love has infinite power to forgive and to purify.

Firmness in faith beyond feelings and emotions

It is therefore imperative that a person should have total faith, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God is present when he or she prays. One must trust that God hears the petitions of men and women and receives the words of prayer with pleasure—that He is not fickle as humans are. God’s love endures and His promise is true. Once He sets His love on a person, He will never turn back from helping him or her. Sometimes God lets a person sense His love, sometimes He chastens him or her with a feeling of aloneness, until that person’s salvation is complete.

We should not depend on sentiment in our relationship with God. Instead, we should be fortified by a faith that goes beyond our feelings.

Excuses for evading prayer

The flesh is the enemy of the human spirit. It finds no comfort in prayer, especially when that prayer is truly pure, performed in the genuine spirit of worship which denies the self and mortifies lusts, ambitions and false, worldly aspirations. The flesh then makes up excuses for avoiding prayer. It malingers, affecting frailty, headaches, pains in the joints or back, or a pressing need to sleep.

If a person forces him- or herself to pray, the flesh tries to curtail his prayer: if he or she forces him- or herself to go through with the prayer, the flesh tries to obscure the meaning of the words. The

tongue falters, the mind is distracted this way and that and becomes dulled. This is because the self, finding an opportunity in the flesh, is unwilling to hear the words of the prayer which bear its death warrant. The flesh behaves like the snake which flees from the snake-charmer and shuts its ears against his enchantment, knowing that his voice spells death. The Lord knows this and that is why He taught us 'always to pray and not lose heart' (Luke 18:1).

However, you will not find these distressing symptoms in a cold, Pharisaic prayer performed for the sake of reward, praise or admiration from people. Far from it: in this guise the flesh accepts prayer and gets really quite keen about it. The practitioner gets up early to perform it in public. He or she makes a point of standing long hours in front of people and raising his or her voice. The person's mind is agile and he or she recites his or her prayers with such studied reverence and painstaking scrupulosity, that people are amazed. Such prayer is a delight to the human ego. It reaps a carnal reward, as it promotes self-assertion rather than self-denial and self-deification rather than mortification. In this way it gets to be as attractive a proposition as making money: the flesh never gets bored with it, any more than with delicious food.

The Lord anticipated this when He said: 'but when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret' (Matt 6:6). The shutting of the door here means that the prayer must be inaudible and invisible to people, at least in what they intend to do in their consciences.

The curbing of the flesh enkindles the spirit

The curbing of the flesh before and during prayer is a matter of the utmost importance if we wish to release the spirit and let it out in fervent prayer. This is achieved through a twofold action. The first is passive: e.g. frequent prostration, fasting, silence, abstinence from luxury or ornament. The second is active: the offering of genuine and cordial love to Christ in terms of affection, longing, and ceaseless untiring dialogue with Him day and night, together with meditation on His words and commandments.

The ardor of prayer depends on the curbing of the flesh coupled with the enkindling of the spirit. The one without the other is inadequate: for the one attests to the other, because they complement and enhance each other: the curbing of the flesh paves the way for igniting the spirit, and the spirit when it is on fire facilitates the curbing of the flesh. By these two acts prayer is safeguarded against distraction, frigidity and boredom.

Prayer and time

Christ came to the world through the incarnation, and Orthodoxy believes in the oneness of the incarnate divine nature. In Christ, human events and time were united with His eternal Godhead, so that all that Christ did through the flesh—be it prayer, mercy, charity or redemptive suffering—became immortal divine acts. That is to say, time has been united with eternity in the person of Jesus Christ.

Entering into Christ through prayer is in fact a glorification and sanctification of time and of the human act itself. True prayer is actually ‘time-redeeming’ and is a transformation of dead time into an immortal divine act. So a genuine engagement in prayer is inevitably accompanied by the abolishment of the sense of the value of time whether humanly or materially, and exchanging the movement of time for that of the spirit. For the spirit, during prayer, is invited to share eternity with the saintly spirits; because in approaching Christ we are inevitably approaching the Kingdom of Heaven.

Haste and boredom in prayer are a deviation to earthly time which is void of the blessings of the Spirit and the breath of eternity. Awareness of earthly time and the importance attached to hours and minutes, as well as the human cares awaiting us after prayer, could stifle the spirit and deprive it of the sense of eternity and of living in it during prayer. So haste and boredom during prayer strip it of its spiritual nature, turning it into one of the physical and mental acts similar to having an interview with the boss or reading a letter or taking breakfast. Christ therefore reminds

us 'to pray and not lose heart' (Luke 18:1). It is better, then, to pray five minutes with a peaceful and serene spirit than a full hour in haste or three hours with boredom.

Christ is our partner in prayer

Christ listens to our prayer and even shares in it. For without Christ our prayer does not come before the Father at all. Through Christ's mercy, love and humility we confidently approach the Father, relying only upon the divine blood shed for reconciliation and justification. This means that Christ is personally present in prayer, and it is He who by His merits uplifts it to the Father. Prayer does not proceed from one party alone, and all we pray for is worth nothing unless Christ says 'Amen' or sanctions it by virtue of His worthiness before the Father, vindicating our weakness and interceding for our sins.

We should be aware of this partnership in prayer and realize that we have no liberty to enter into it, continue or end it as we please. We follow Christ, making petitions through His mouth, gathering up courage through His blood, cherishing hopes through His righteousness and speaking on intimate terms with the Father through the loving spirit of His Son.

The Holy Spirit cries out in our hearts

The Holy Spirit is very meek. He answers the call of man at once—provided that the person calls in sincerity, faith and simplicity. It would be enough to call Him as one calls a pure and simple child, and he would listen and respond right away. The book of the Coptic canonical hours teaches us to address Him in these words: 'kindly come and abide in us.'

So it is that the Holy Spirit rests in one's heart, by means of a simple but firm faith in God's mercy. Now the abiding of the Holy Spirit is not accompanied by any sensational sign. He finds no rest in cries and discords, or in a heart which is cruel, malicious, wrathful or proud; or in a worldly man, or in a lover of earthly

things; or in a man disposed to fleeting beauty; or in one aspiring to the glories of this world.

The Holy Spirit is a friend and partner of a poor but grateful man, as well as of a rich man who loves the poor. He is the comforter of persecuted subordinates and merciful bosses, a light to the wretched and a life to those who dedicate themselves to the service of the Gospel and to charity among the poor. Therefore, to safeguard the power of the Holy Spirit that sanctions prayer and lifts it to God, we should first learn to satisfy Him by shunning all faults inconsistent with His meekness, holiness and love.

Moreover, he or she who prays before God should also have full trust aided by the Holy Spirit, who gave birth to us at the baptismal font. One should repeatedly cry out from the depths of one's heart, calling upon Him to qualify him for prayer and grant us power to fulfill it in accordance with the wish of the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Prayer concerns the Holy Spirit more than it concerns us. For through prayer the new man begotten by the Holy Spirit within us grows up till he attains enlightenment, accepts the will of God, and learns how to implement it by grace.

Prayer is a divine call and a return of an exiled creation

True prayer, which gives us access to God and admittance to His presence, is not a purely human act. For more than anything else it is a divine call, to which we are merely responding. God is always ready to accept us. He calls us incessantly: 'all day long I have held out my hands'; 'come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest'; 'him who comes to me I will not cast out' (Rom 10:21; Matt 11:29; Jn 6:37). It hardly seems possible, but even the prospect of putting up with us for ever does not put Him off! This is so because he finds pleasure in our company.

So our being with God is, as it were, a return of the exiled creation to the bosom of its Creator, like the return of Adam to paradise. Prayer in itself is an atonement for the long hours we

spend away from God in worldly cares and duties. Prayer is thus like a true repentance before God.

In the past, God drove Adam out of His presence; now He urges us all day long to come in to Him and abide with Him.

And once we have entered in to God, He does not want us to leave Him at all. A genuine and successful prayer which accords with God's will should inwardly and secretly continue in our heart in an ineffable dialogue after we leave the presence of God. We should go about our business with prayer being still active within our hearts.

How to submit our earthly affairs in prayer

Prayer is not an opportunity to entreat God about what belongs to the flesh, secures our livelihood, makes our tasks easy and prospers our earthly duties. Prayer is rather an opportunity for the spirit, an outlet to heaven and an illuminating small window through which we peep out at eternal life—where we shall be taken after consigning this body to the dust where all tasks and responsibilities terminate irretrievably. For all things which engage us in this earth are transient, whereas prayer endures, and every minute we spend in prayer is from and to eternity.

Taking this into account, we should submit our affairs in prayer in a way that befits the spirit; that is to say, all our earthly affairs, tasks, duties and cares should be brought before God in prayer, that He might remove from them their mortal, transient nature and clothe them with the divine mantle of His favor, whereby they are sanctified.

We are not to entreat God that our interests may thrive, or that our responsibilities and works may grow and flourish, thereby giving us earthly fame and glory, carnal peace and comfort. Rather, we should ask Him to root out of all our affairs the spirit of selfishness, which glorifies the human ego, and to inspire in us uprightness of mind and heart that we may not use guile, deceit, covetousness, falsehood, theft or lying in our work.

We need to seek the support of His spiritual power so that we may not fear threats, shirk dangers, flatter people or grieve about loss or oppression. We must ask God to grant us the ability to heed the interests of the spirit above all other works or responsibilities, so that we may defend the righteous, praise the upright, and give liberally, putting love and long-suffering above all material prosperity.

Thus prayer becomes an occasion for converting the occupations of the flesh to the active concerns of the spirit. Prayer is then an instrument for purging our minds, wills and acts from the adulteration of sin, so that all our deeds, however trifling and insignificant, may be sanctified. In this way they are made fit to be offered to God side by side with the greatest religious services.

III

‘WE ARE CHANGED INTO THE SAME IMAGE’

The frequency of prayer works in man’s inner being

The frequency and endurance of prayer in accordance with the canonical hours of day and night set by the order of the Church, together with the prayer inspired freely by the Holy Spirit at all times—appropriate or not—is an effective means of being transformed by renewing our minds (cf. Rom 12:2). The children of Christ know this very well.

The frequency of prayer day and night, let us say twenty or thirty times a day—having every time as much as the Spirit graciously grants in terms of words and love—perhaps for five minutes or even for one minute each time, is enough to produce in our minds and hearts, as well as in our manners and character, a fundamental change, hardly perceivable to ourselves, but visible to everyone near us. For the frequent looking up to Christ in prayer impresses in our inner being the invisible image of Christ—that is, His attributes, His exquisite sweetness and the light of His face.

St Paul reveals to us this experience by saying, ‘My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!’ (Gal 4:19). Constant speaking to Christ in prayer makes us, without realizing it, receptive to the impression of His image in the depths of our souls.¹ This fact is clearly apparent in radiating bodies: when a non-radiating body is exposed to a radiating one, it receives radiation proportionately to the time of exposure. How great then will be our radiation if we often approach the source of

¹ “And we all, with unveiled face, reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18).

the light of the world, from which all bodies, heavenly and earthly, receive their light—Jesus Christ the light of the Father and of the world.

Christ Himself calls us to keep always close to Him so that the darkness of the world may not envelop us and blind our eyes to the divine truth: 'walk while you have the light, lest darkness overtake you; I am the light of the world. He that follows me shall not walk in darkness' (John 12:35; 8:12).

But as to those who willfully neglect prayer, they alienate themselves from truth against their will; they walk along the brink of the abyss of doubt, i.e. the outer darkness, and become exposed to the danger of blasphemy without being aware of it; and the least stumbling block is enough to hurl them headlong into the abyss of despondency and enmity to God.

The reverse is also true; for those who practice frequent prayer become more firmly established in their faith than mountains. This is not a matter of mere talk or ostentation, but their very lives testify to this truth. They are long-suffering, rejoice in tribulations and endure an amazing degree of suffering and injustice. All these qualities are signs that testify to the strength of their faith. They are not overtaken by darkness—as the Lord has promised. So frequent prayer is a divine power working in the inner man, qualifying him in the end for the reception of the power of grace, in preparation for the mystical and perpetual union with God.

Prayer as communion and union with God

Prayer initially is the door through which we enter into the Lord and the Lord enters into us. He knocks again and again at the gates of our conscience, so that we may welcome Him in as an eternal partner in an eternal life.

At this point prayer demands an intensive curbing of the fleshly nature and the earthly ego. For these have no desire to forfeit any of the pleasures of this world for the sake of another life, which has no place whatsoever either for the flesh or the ego.

If prayer is kept up and the carnal nature subjected to the Spirit, every evasion or procrastination, every species of laziness or stubbornness, will be swept away. This will be an assertion of the triumph of the Spirit and of the sovereignty of God. Such prayer is evidence of vital interaction and communion with the Lord. It is the start of a dynamic relationship with Christ in goodwill and obedience to the Father. The hallmark of this walk with the Lord is a love that makes light of suffering—even to the point of death.

Prayer in communion with God can never be accounted as one of the deeds of this life: its duration should not be measured by the temporal hours of this age. Instead, it consists in catching glimpses of transfiguration. During these brief experiences a person can enjoy a foretaste of the kingdom of God. There is a genuine spiritual sense of the eternal life of Christ coursing through one's being, and of a light that shines in the darkness of blind instincts and stumbling blocks, of the evils of men and the tyranny of Satan.

Such moments are in fact the rendezvous with heaven of which the Lord spoke: 'the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live' (Jn 5:25). The words, 'the hour is coming', hint at the times of eternity which bear the blessings of God. These blessings spring from the very same source as eternal life itself, although hidden behind the dark veil of sin. The words, 'and now is', are an assertion that eternity has broken through this veil and that the light of Christ blazes into the human heart during prayer, defying the world, the aggravations of the flesh, and the Prince of Darkness.

This, in effect, is the prayer of resurrection: the moments of eternity and the rendezvous with Christ which are experienced by His children who are caught up in His secret mystery. When they hear His voice, they do not harden their hearts but instead stand up to pray and praise with tireless perseverance.

Prayer is more powerful than sin

Sin drains a person physically and psychologically. But God's mercy and love are not so. Since God is 'stronger than men' He

loves them constantly: before they sin, while they are sinning and after they have sinned.

Prayer, as a form of communion with God, puts us in touch with His merciful forgiveness that pardons the grossest and most multifarious sins. Prayer, in and of itself, is a declaration of regret and repentance—and God always accepts penitents, not wishing their death but to see them restored to life by returning to Him.

Although sin actually destroys much of the strength we gain through prayer, it cannot take away all of it. Even though a person may sin after praying, there is always a reserve of power left over from prayer—whatever sin he may have committed. So prayer triumphs in the end. For beyond all sins there may still remain a stock of power in a person's heart, as well as an emotional reserve built up from the prayers that have been raised up to God—with a devoted heart and a penitent conscience.

Through continuous prayer a person can acquire a great fund of power, which is sufficient not only to erase all sins, but also to purge the conscience from the painful sense of sin, as the joy of forgiveness and salvation replaces its grief and pain. Prayer is indeed healing for the soul.

However, this does not come about in a day or even a year. In the course of many years prayer proceeds to work its way in a slow, steady and accumulative manner, which destroys the spirit of sin and gradually cleanses the conscience, until the sense of prayer matures. Then suddenly the light of salvation illuminates the soul with a joy permeating the whole being and enveloping a person's whole life. This inner light, which seems to be sudden, is however the work of long years of thousands of prayers.

Prayer is a reaction to the divine love and an act of obedience to God:

Prayer, however lonely and embued with man's sense of unworthiness to speak with God on account of his many transgressions and vices, is above all the sign of love exchanged with God. The

love of God is shown in drawing the heart of man to prayer and to standing in His presence, and the love of man is manifested by submitting his heart to God, even in its sinful and penitent state.

Prayer then is a response of love. At first the prayer of love is very subdued and unsusceptible to verbal expression. It is uttered more in words of regret and repentance. But advanced prayer, being a mark of matured love, is not short of words of love.

God is love, all love and the spring of love. The human heart, which does not respond to the divine love, remains distant from God, deprived of his radiant and abundantly generous nature. The first indication of responsiveness is when a person is prompted to speak with God, and this is prayer. Prayer is the first proof that God's love has been poured into a human heart.

The reason why a person is at first taken up with the confession of sins is that the divine love, although it awakens and attracts the heart, is so pure that it cannot tolerate sin. So the first response to love becomes prayer for forgiveness. Repentance and purging are a preparation for the mutual exchange of divine love from a pure heart. In praying with tears and contrition of heart we are responding to love and our hearts are being cleansed to prepare us for receiving the Lover Himself. Jesus Christ calls us to repentance so that we may become worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven. During prayer, where Jesus Himself is present, the Kingdom of Heaven comes very close to us, and the sense of penitence is so intensified that a person is ready to atone for his or her sins by sacrificing everything, even life itself. This is caused by the power of Christ's love, which He pours into our hearts as we pray in a way which we cannot perceive, but which fuels our fervor in worship to an amazing extent. 'Love is as strong as death' (Song of Solomon 8:6).

Prayer gives God an opportunity to pour His spirit of love into the human heart; then love performs by itself its work in the heart. First of all, it puts sin to shame, then condemns it, and finally forgives it. By accepting this series of actions during prayer, the person who prays is accepting love. For prayer is but an acceptance

of the spirit of love and a means of submission to its purifying effects.

Prayer is a work of obedience

Submission to the spirit of love and yielding to its ascendancy over the heart during the prayer of repentance is the first and foremost expression of man's obedience to God, or obedience to His love. In other words, a person's commitment to pray at the first prompting of the heart is actually a response to the voice of love in a willing submission. The divine love summons a person to prayer and the heart obeys the summons. The sincerity of prayer made in obedience to the call of love, is seen by its being imbued with remorse and contrition for every sin—however slight. For repentance is the first response to love.

Sincere prayer is in itself obedience to God. To stick at prayer and accept readily the time it takes and the demands it makes shows a determination to obey God. A man who learns every day to pray more sincerely is one who sincerely obeys God.

Prayer is the gateway of obedience to God

A person who wants to learn how to obey the voice of God must first train him- or herself to respond readily to the spirit of prayer when God motivates one's heart. For this will afterwards make it easy for him or her to obey God even in the hardest and most difficult matters.

A person who does not learn obedience to God through prayer may think that one can obey God at any time. But when the voice of God, taking man by surprise, calls for sacrifice, his recalcitrant flesh brings up plausible excuses for evading the voice of God. Finally, the flesh compels man to take its side, at which point he falls from grace and goes away with his head bent with grief.

Obedience to God is one of the hardest prerequisites of the relationship between man and God, and many prophets and saints from of old sometimes failed in its test. But if a person is disciplined through daily prayer to obey the voice of God, it becomes

easy for that person to accept spontaneously the spirit of obedience—for he or she has learnt in prayer the spirit of surrender to the leadership of God and to the economy of His grace, little by little, till obedience becomes part and parcel of one's thinking, feeling and practical motivation.

Christ Himself was said to have learned obedience: 'although He was a Son, He learned obedience' (Heb 5:8).

During prayer man accepts the state of surrender to God. In order to perfect him in obedience God brings him into suffering. If he responds (positively) to the sufferings laid upon him by God, his obedience to Him proves perfect, which, in turn, testifies to the perfection of his salvation. 'Although He was a Son, He learned obedience through what He suffered; and being made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him' (Heb 5:8, 9). Prayer is thus the gateway of obedience in which the spirit of surrender to God is graciously granted to man. As for the joyful endurance of suffering, it is the perfection of obedience—and this is the fruit of prayer.

It is the person who loves prayer and is devoted to it who can endure suffering or even love it. But that who hates prayer inevitably hates suffering, thus proving that he or she is completely devoid of obedience to God and, consequently, of the divine love to whose action the unobedient person is utterly unresponsive.

Prayer grants man the power to respond to God's will:

The spirit of surrender to God which we accept during prayer actually means the defeat of the will of man. This does not come about easily, being the outcome of a long struggle between the human ego—with all its worldly hopes or vain religious aspirations—and the will of God which desires only man's salvation. The will of the ego cannot be crushed except by being constantly countered by the action of God, which disturbs the false peace of the self and undermines the towers built for its own glory before men.

In the course of this struggle, if man cease to pray, he loses his commitment to pray and obey the will of God. The purpose of this

life and its struggle—which is his salvation—vanishes from his sight. As a result, he indulges his own inclinations and starts to complain at the trials into which God led him for his salvation. As for the losses and humiliation provided for him by God's wisdom and care, in order to free him from the fetters of his own vanity, these he rejects. They become so distasteful to him that he would hanker after the grave rather than see himself humiliated before other people and the world at large. This shows that he sets a higher value on his ego than God, who is the life-giver.

But the person who resorts to prayer and sticks at it can recognize that in sufferings, losses and humiliations God is deigning to chasten that person: they are a dispensation to bring to fulfillment the miracle of human humility. At last, through constant prayer he or she will be granted the spirit of surrender and submission to the will of God. Man's eyes will then be opened by grace, so that he can see how his salvation actually depends on the acceptance of sufferings, losses, illnesses and all kinds of humiliation.

From that time forward, man will increasingly take the side of God's will until his own will is totally defeated and his ambition annihilated. All his joy will then consist in the fulfillment of the will of God alone, which he will greatly relish even in the most dire states of suffering.

Through this process prayer gives us the ability to take the side of God's will, and to surrender to Him joyfully.

Perfection in obedience leads man to sacrifice

Obedience matures along with prayer. And perfect obedience is a sign of perfect love. When the heart of man becomes sensitive to the love of Christ, deeply affected by it, responsive and obedient to it, it is then qualified to receive the mystery of Christ's love, which is self-sacrifice. That is to say, when a person is rooted in prayer and loves it, he or she enters into a spiritual partnership with Christ. One of the distinctions of this partnership is suffering for sinners, victims of injustice and the poor. Such a person has acquired a heart like that of Christ.

Constant, sincere prayer is an aspect of the life of partnership between Christ and the Christian, which communicates the essential message of that relationship. For a person who perseveres in prayer will soon have a heart that is on fire with the very message of Christ. It is on fire for the salvation of humanity and love for sinners; it sacrifices the self for the sake of comforting those who are troubled; it chooses poverty for the enriching of souls; and it bears the cross with honor as a sign of true love.

Prayer begins by an encounter with Christ. It continues through love towards Him, then partaking in Him, followed by actually sharing in His life and in His cross.

So the person who seeks to bear Christ's message and preach His sufferings and His cross, must first of all devote him- or herself wholeheartedly to prayer. Through prayer that person will learn to accept His will, in order to serve His message.

IV

PRAYER FOR OTHERS

Prayer as an aid to evangelization:

The joy of sharing with Christ in prayer and the honor of bearing the cross does not amount to the ultimate fulfillment of prayer. Rather, it represents a call to initiation into the mystery of prayer which transcends the human intellect. Prayer then becomes a source of power for others.

The one in whom Christ confides His very heart and His message to sinners, receives from Christ the power to consummate His love and fulfill His work. It is such a person as this who will love sinners just as Christ does, who will have compassion for the poor, the sick and the suffering—who will give himself to them in self-sacrificial service. And the desire that they may recover, be comforted and fortified will lead this person to plead with God on their behalf.

Prayer, when it attains to the level of love through perseverance and obedience—so qualifying us for partnership with Christ—becomes a powerfully effective instrument for comforting and helping others. It will even be invested with the power of absolving the sins of others. For union with Christ during prayer makes a person capable of identifying with the sinner: it brings with it a disposition to carry the other's sins and infirmities and to bear all kinds of chastisement for the other's sake. This readiness for self-sacrifice in union with Christ qualifies the person who prays to ask forgiveness for others, and forgiveness is accordingly granted to them.

Here prayer reaches a state of paramount importance with regard to the salvation of others, atonement for their sins and the out-

pouring of God's mercy upon those who are alienated from Him through ignorance. Prayer thus becomes an aid to evangelization and is a mystical force preparing hearts to receive forgiveness and salvation. A person praying privately and fervently in his or her room can bring about the salvation of thousands of souls, because of his or her union with Christ.

God uses our prayers as an instrument for the salvation of others:

We should know that when God draws us into prayer He does this not for the sake of our salvation alone, but also with the purpose of using our prayers to save others. That is why prayer is so honorable and precious in the sight of God.

The person who labors in his or her prayer and quickly develops the spirit of submission and obedience to the will of God, becomes a good soldier for Jesus Christ. God Himself summons this person every day and trains him or her to stand before God to intercede for others, granting his or her requests. This person is sure to receive from the Lord the power to divert many souls from the road that leads to death back to the bosom of God.

If we make progress in prayer this shows that our love for God has become more intimate. This is a direct consequence of God's contentment with us and His acceptance of our weakness. It is largely due to the widening of our human horizons and a recognition of our inevitable obligations towards others. These include our spiritual responsibility for sinners and those who are weak in their faith and love; for the agonized and crushed; for the ministers and preachers of the Gospel.

Copious tears and supplication for others mark the highest state of perfected prayer. It is as if our advancement in prayer were a gift granted not so much for our benefit as that of our brothers and sisters who are deficient and weak in prayer: 'pray for one another, that you may be healed' (Jas 5:16). The apostle James' charge, that the priests of the Church should be called to pray over the sick and the suffering for their healing, implies that the priest should be the

most advanced in grace and prayer, being set apart to pray for others.

Our progress in prayer, the gift of tears and true intimacy with God all absolutely depend on our developing the ability to share with tormented and humiliated people. 'Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them; and those who are ill-treated, since you also are in the body' (Heb 13:3). In other words, the growth of our communion with God, rooted in prayer, depends on the depth and maturity of our awareness of the burdens of other people, having for ourselves the greater share in them.

Our partnership with Christ means our partnership in the sufferings of people

We do not obtain our partnership with the suffering, sick and humiliated people, nor can we bear the burdens of others, out of our own human affection, or from the spur of transient emotions, much less so from the desire to gain praise or for self-display—this type of sharing declines swiftly and finally disappears. But by persistence in pure, sincere prayer we receive these feelings as a gift from God. This enables us not only to sustain but also to deepen our partnership with those who suffer, to a degree that we become unable to live without them and find no peace except in our sharing in their troubles and pains. The secret of this gift lies in our partnership with Christ and affinity with His divine nature and qualities in the sense that He Himself is at work in us 'both to will and to work' (Phil 2:13).

So our participation in the sufferings of others and our partnership with Christ are ultimately or substantially interdependent; to the point that to pick up the cross of Christ automatically commits us to carrying the people's cross right to the end, in unconditional sharing with them. The cessation of intimacy with Christ during prayer would indicate that a disease has struck prayer to the very quick. To those who work, serve and pray for others and share their burdens, this would be a definite sign of damage and defeat. It begins with a lukewarmness, feebleness and

reluctance to perform duties which were once sweet to the taste. It ends in neglect, evasion and finally refusal to work for others. For without Christ service to others would be impossible to achieve in a successful, fruitful and consistent fashion. And Christ is unattainable by any other means than prayer.

Preoccupation with oneself adulterates prayer

Prayer reaches its true purity when we comprehensively and purposefully forget ourselves, in our willingness to be concerned for others, their problems and their salvation. The degree of perfection in pure prayer is in proportion to its perfection of love. In the ultimate state of perfection love 'seeks not her own' (1 Cor 13:5). To be taken up with the self and its demands, is a flaw in love and consequently in prayer. Even if those demands are 'spiritual' and not worldly, the same principle holds true: the root of self-preoccupation in either form is a defective knowledge of Christ and an impaired relationship with Him. For Christ said, 'I have come down from heaven, *not* to do my own will' (Jn 6:38); and, 'Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends' (Jn 15:13); and, 'Love your enemies' (Mt 5:44).

Preoccupation with the self pollutes prayer. Forgetting ourselves in prayer begins intentionally. However, if we sincerely persist in this intention before God, He will eventually grant it to us as a gift, and we shall no longer care for what pertains to ourselves, but for the others. It is when we completely neglect ourselves in prayer and refrain from personal requests, that God will begin to care for us, taking on the economy of our affairs, whether material or spiritual, even to the minutest detail, while we content ourselves only with interceding, pleading and sacrificing for others.

That is to say, when we demonstrate concern for others, God concerns Himself with us: when we restrict our requests to the needs of others, God will give us what we need without our asking for it.

This principle helps us to grasp the plan of salvation which Christ handed on to His disciples, when he commanded them,

'Make disciples of all nations' (Mt 28:19). For a person whose heart is open to God, God is sufficient: he or she shall not go on asking for him- or herself. But anyone whose heart is not yet open needs other loving hearts to be open before God on his or her behalf, so that God may deal with this person graciously according to the petitions and prayers of his or her brothers and sisters.

This means that the one who grows to know and love God bears the responsibility for his brother and sister whose heart is not yet open to God. So it is that God reaches sinners who are estranged from Him, through the prayers of those who love Him and are close to Him.

In this way devoted people who are faithful to Christ turn into true ambassadors for Christ on earth. Loving God and being close to Him, they are in the place where they can reconcile others with God and God with those others. This they may bring about by bringing people before God in their prayers, and sacrificing themselves for them: 'so we are ambassadors for Christ... We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God' (2 Cor 5:20).

It is often difficult to get alongside sinners and evil people, either because of their malice or because of their shame. However, by prayer we bridge the chasm which separates us from them, thus overcoming their wickedness and getting over their shame and reluctance to speak with us. For prayer enables us to approach their hearts subtly, without their sensing it.

Moreover, we can enter their hearts and groan in them as if we were the guilty and wicked ones. All this may take place even without our ever being known to them, or their ever speaking to us. If we raise our prayers from within their hearts, and, bearing the burden of their sins, cry to God, He will hear them through us. Their hearts will turn to Him despite their rebellious nature. Regret will invade their conscience, and we will see their need of repentance so frequently on their own faces, that they will hasten to God and to us for help.

So prayer is an attractive force that draws one person powerfully towards another through the Holy Spirit. The result is that prayer makes the two individuals one in Christ.

We urgently need others to pray for us

It is not only sinners and evil-doers who need prayers on their behalf to prompt them to repentance and bring them to the knowledge of God. You and I, too, desperately need others to pray for us. For we often neglect the scrutiny of ourselves and our conscience, and ugly sins and transgressions accumulate in our hearts and minds. We shut our eyes to them during confession and shrink from exposing them for many years, causing the debilitation of our spiritual life. Our souls remain sick and flabby, lacking the power of God and the clear action of His grace. We speak of the sins of others and pray for people while our bodies are in the grip of sin, our thoughts contaminated, our instincts running riot and our souls are spoiled.

We ourselves are in dire need of someone to pray for us warmly, that the Spirit may expose to us our hidden sins and the dregs of those sins still lingering in our hearts. The prayers of others can move our consciences with remorse and cleanse them more and more from our hidden faults. In this way we are prepared for receiving the power of God into our lives and into our prayers, and can cooperate with the action of grace wholeheartedly.

The prayers of others on our behalf, when soundly and powerfully directed towards us, become in us a chiding and an alerting force, like rockets lighting up the darkness of our consciences and inflaming our hearts to seek repentance and salvation. The prayers of others, when fervent, become one of the main factors for quickening the servants of God, and providing them with extra ardency.

Even apostles, prophets and saints needed prayers on their behalf. Peter would have fallen into permanent apostasy and lost his faith for ever, were it not for the prayers of Christ for him. If the

Church had not interceded in prayer for him, Peter would have been executed in prison by Herod.

St Paul too felt the need of prayer on his behalf, never ceasing to ask every church to pray for him that his ministry could continue and the Spirit might open his mouth and give him the words that he needed.

An apostle, prophet or saint finds little strengthening in his own prayers for himself or his ministry. He is in dire need of extra support from the prayers of others, so that God's power might be poured abundantly upon him, and that God's grace might find new channels to him.

Thus the prayers of others are demonstrated to be an indispensable source of strength for the minister and preacher. The more others pray for him, the stronger his ministry becomes: the longer the knees bent on his behalf stay bent, the more lasting will be his fervor for ministry and the more effective his words in the Spirit will grow.

Grasp the importance of prayer for others

Prayer is an indispensable act. Externally, it appears as an act of faithfulness: the faithfulness of a servant to his or her Master and Creator. Whether the prayerful person thanks, praises or glorifies God, he or she does so in response to what God graciously granted him or her. It is from God's hands that this person receives and to Him that he or she delivers back. Abstaining from prayer is therefore dangerous, for would it be possible for an unfaithful servant to remain in the house of his Lord? (Cf. Luke 12:46).

As to the essence of prayer, progress will more clearly reveal its true nature when we feel that it becomes an expression of the vital relationship which binds man to his God. The person who is alive in God is he or she who prays; conversely, the person who neglects prayer is bound to be confined within him- or herself, being void of the signs of God's life in him or her.

In other words, prayer begins as an act of the trustworthiness of a servant. It appears afterwards as a sign of eternal life. However, by

further progress in one's relationship with God, one feels the intrusion of a new and important element: that prayer has begun to be an expression of the relationship of man with his fellow-man, when he experiences by himself that prayer has come to be a means of strength and life to others as well. For he or she who prays for others fortifies and revives souls which are dead or treading the path to death. Hence the Lord's saying, 'Raise the dead' (Mt 10:8). Prayer here appears as a serious trust and responsibility. For if we cease, for any reason, to pray for the sinners living around us and neglect to intercede for their sake, they will die!

Neglect of prayer here reaches its most serious consequences. For a sinner may die in his or her sin because his or her soul has not quickened by prayer for him or her. The person who neglected praying for that sinner will then be unable to clear him- or herself of the guilt he or she bears for letting the sinner miss the opportunity of life—a task which God entrusted to that person. See how important prayer is!

In other words, if prayer seems to be a necessity at the outset of one's relationship with God, and if it seems essential for those advanced in the spirit, it is to those entrusted with the secret of supplication and intercession for others one of the most serious obligations entrusted by God to man.

The person who feels the necessity of praying for sinners and neglects it is actually involved in a great sin, and bears the responsibility for their death!

'As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you' (1 Sam 12:23). The person who has been given the power to raise the dead and does not raise him or her bears the responsibility for his or her death. For prayer is a power of life out of death—sin being death, and prayer the intercession for the forgiveness of sins.

'The prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he shall be forgiven' (Jas 5:15).

We are then called to pray and supplicate for sinners, not only to raise them from the death of sin, but also to die ourselves on their account. The prayer we offer importunately, intercedingly and in tears on behalf of sinners, clears us of their blood and redeems us from death on their account.

So it is that intercessory prayer for sinners increases the number of preachers on earth and lays the responsibility of man's salvation on his fellow man: 'son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel' (Ezek 3:17). Man has thus been made a preacher of salvation when he pours himself out in prayer for the hordes of sinners, whether close to him or far from him—known to him or unknown. 'Go and make disciples of all nations' (Mt 28:19).

Through prayer, man becomes a priest, in the sense that he or she becomes entrusted with the souls of others, able through love and sacrifice, and through partaking of the blood of Christ and His priesthood, to lift from them the sentence of death for sin. For within his or her heart a person may bear the sin of others in their stead. Crushed under it, he or she groan and repent, asking forgiveness as a sinner on their behalf.



V

THE MYSTIC'S PRAYER RITE

**(when prayer becomes elevated to praising,
glorifying and gazing at the face of Christ)**

PRAYER is a call to get to know the divinity and attributes of God. 'The Lord is with you, while you be with Him. If you seek Him, He will be found by you, but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you' (2 Chron 15:2). 'This is what the Lord has said, "I will show myself holy among those who are near me"' (Lev 10:3).

When a person's heart is absorbed in contemplating the splendid attributes of God and comes close to Him during prayer, he or she enters into the experience of tasting God. Every time a new attribute of God is revealed to this person, he or she becomes a partaker of it. For God is not revealed hypothetically to man, but in power, albeit in a mystery. During prayer, God removes the veil from the mind and heart of the prayerful person, and reveals to him or her the secrets of His dispensation. With the veil removed, this person may perceive God's ordering of the creation and His personal care and guidance to him or her throughout the events of many years. In this way a person may clearly perceive the attributes of God, yet in a sort of internal sense that is attested by power, in which one can taste God and eat Him just as he tastes honey.

If honey, which is a transient food, warms the human body, how much more will God enkindle a person's whole spiritual being, so that he or she feels a divine fire raging within, working for purification and remorse, for gladdening and comforting—at one time instilling in a person the earnest yearning for the kingdom of heaven, at another spurring him or her on to service and sacrifice for

others. And so man receives during his or her prayers the inspirations of the will of God relevant to him or her.

In either case, prayer rises to a high level of praising and glorification of the wonderful attributes of God, where neither tongue nor mind nor body tires of praising and shouting in the name of God and for His attributes. This fervent prayer, fired with the attributes of God and exclusively devoted to extolling and exalting them, is the prayer rite of the Cherubim.

It is well known that the Cherubim are full of eyes, signifying the greatest insight by which they comprehend the nature of God. Such comprehension cannot be achieved by reason, but rather by power-encounter. It is said that the Cherubim are consumed with fire, which implies that they are profoundly impressed with the nature of God. We can assume that the connection between the two natures—full of eyes and consumed with flames—is fundamental in spiritual creation. The unveiling of the spiritual insight in prayer leads inexorably to the reception of the burning power of the divine nature.

We also know that the prayer rite of the Cherubim is characterized by voices which cry out without rest, and mouths which do not cease to exalt and glorify God, calling, 'Holy, holy, holy'. For the nature of God is exceedingly glorious and no creature, seeing it, can cease from exalting it.

So when we gaze lovingly at the face of Jesus Christ in frequent prayer that has no other motive than the glorification of God, the mental veil is lifted from our spirits and we perceive the glory of God's nature in Christ, 'who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ' (2 Cor 4:6). It is thus that we enter into the mystic's rite of prayer.

And so we discover that, through constantly gazing at Christ in prayer, we become endowed with the multitude of Cherubic eyes. These eyes work within us 'to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.' It is then that our hearts will become inflamed with a celestial fire, which blazes within us with such a power that all we can do in those rapturous hours is glorify God in endless praise.

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