

9. The Law of Grace and the Law of Prayer

Prayer is the great means of salvation, since it gives everyone access to God's grace. Everyone receives sufficient grace to pray. In the words of St. Alphonsus de Liguori, "If you pray, you will be saved." If a person does not pray, he or she will not receive the help needed from God to avoid temptation and overcome the influence of evil in one's life. St. Paul exhorts us to pray without ceasing (1 Thess 5:17). Prayer turns natural bodies into supernatural organisms; it embraces every dimension of our human makeup: the physical, mental, spiritual, and social. All of these dimensions come together in the Liturgy. When the Church is at prayer, the supernatural organism of Christ's mystical body divinizes the human community by enabling it to participate in the intimate life of the Trinity.

I. Anthropological Review

Human Nature: Four Anthropological Dimensions (1 Thessalonians 5:17; 1 Corinthians 12:12); Physical, Mental/Psychological, Spiritual, Social. The Supernatural Organism: Man is Capax Dei; Grace Perfects Nature

The Law of Grace and the Law of Prayer: Created Grace/Uncreated Grace; Sanctifying Grace/Actual Grace; Prayer Requires Faith; Faith Requires Grace
Saint Alphonsus de Liguori's Insight: "Everyone Receives Sufficient Grace to Pray." (St. Alphonsus de Liguori, *Prayer the Great Means of Salvation*, 18th c.)
"If You Pray, You Will Be Saved." (St. Alphonsus de Liguori, PGMS); Prayer, the Great Means of Salvation" (St. Alphonsus de Liguori, PGMS)

Prayer is not something we can do on our own. We need God's help, God's grace. We all receive sufficient grace to pray. Prayer is thus a gift from God. It takes many forms: physical, mental, spiritual, social. Because we are composite wholes, each form of prayer necessarily involves the whole person.

II. The Types of Prayer: The Need for God's help and the Necessity of Grace -
Types of Prayer:

Oratio (vocal prayer): Vocal prayer is an essential element of the Christian tradition. It is usually the first kind of prayer we are ever taught (Sign of the Cross, Our Father, Grace before Meals). In its primary sense it refers to prayers expressed vocally to God (e.g., Jesus teaching His disciples the Lord's Prayer).

In a secondary sense, it refers to all prayers involving some form of bodily expression (e.g., singing, dance, genuflecting, raising our arms to God in prayer).

Vocal prayer is embodied prayer. Although it includes the other dimensions of our human makeup (mental, spiritual, social), its The Lord's Prayer by James Tissot, emphasis is on physical, bodily expression. 1886-94

Meditatio (meditation): Meditation, in turn, emphasizes the mental (intellectual, psychological, and emotional) dimension of who we are. St. Teresa describes meditation as "the soul's intimate conversation with God." It involves sharing everything in our lives with God, reflecting on His Word for our lives and resolving to do something about it. There are many and varied methods of meditation as there are spiritual masters (St. Teresa of Avila, St. Ignatius Loyola, St. Francis de sales, St. Alphonsus Liguori - to name but a few).

3. Meditation according to St. Alphonsus de Liguori: It all takes place against a backdrop of silence. Preparation: Act of Faith, Act of Contrition. Act of Petition for Light. The Body of the Meditation: The Meditation, The Affections, The Petitions, The Resolution

The Conclusion: Prayer of Thanksgiving, Prayer for Help to Carry Out One's Resolutions, Prayer for Perseverance

Contemplatio (contemplation): Contemplative prayer emphasizes the spirit. It is wordless prayer. St. Teresa of Avila: "Contemplative prayer is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us." (St. Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life*, 8.5); The closer to get to someone, the less need is there of words to communicate. St. John Vianney: A peasant's response when asked why he spent so much time before the Blessed Sacrament: "I look at Him, and He looks at me." (CCC 2715) Etty Hillesum: "Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths, or the turning inwards in prayer for five short minutes." - Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork* (New York: Picador, 1996), 93.

III. An Anthropological Approach to Prayer:

Physical {soma not sarx}: Refers to corporeal human existence, not in any denigrated sense (as when Paul contrasts spirit, pneuma, with flesh, sarx), but as a neutral, albeit essential, element of human existence. It is that aspect of a person, which, although under the sway of the "law of flesh" {sarx), has been and will be redeemed by those living according to the Spirit of Christ. Includes: vocal expressions (singing, verbal meditations, symbols - e.g., the sign of the cross, uplifted arms, the holding of hands - and posture), and the rigors of corporeal sacrifice (fasting and abstinence).

Soul {psyche), for Paul refers to the conscious, deliberative, and emotional side of

human existence. Here, reason plays an active role in constructing the concepts upon which a positive theology of God is based. Includes: images, mental and affective prayer, expressions of love, the examination of conscience, prayers of petition, resolutions to action, meditative reading of Scripture.

"Spirit" {pneuma), for Paul, stands for the innermost depths of the human person as it is open to the divine presence and awake to God's Spirit. It is that aspect of the person that communes with God beneath the sphere of human consciousness and cries out "Abba Father" from the depths of the human heart (Romans 8:15). Includes: resting, yearning, longing, being in the presence of God. Listening to God in silence. Apophatic theology and the way of unknowing.

"Social," for Paul, is borrowed in part from the Platonic parallel of the human soul as "writ large" in the fabric of human society. Here, the social dimension of the Pauline anthropology comes to the fore, doing so in a way which highlights the fundamental communal orientation of each level of human existence. That is to say that the contemplative, mental, and physical levels of human prayer reach their fullest expression only to the extent that they are done "in Christ" and hence in solidarity with all those who, in varying degrees, are incorporated into his Body, the Church. Includes: celebrating the Liturgy, the Divine Office, popular communal devotions, prayer groups, pilgrimage.

IV. Finding The Right Rhythm: The Challenge of Prayer and the Role of Silence
1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." The point being made is that all of the various levels of prayer in the Church's tradition are necessary for human existence. Contemplation is not to be pitted against mental prayer; nor the latter against fast and abstinence, or against liturgical prayer. Because the human person is a complex, multidimensional reality, all of these forms are necessary to orient a particular aspect of the human person toward the transcendent ground of his or her being.

That is not to say that a person may not be more disposed to one form or another, but only that all four levels - the spiritual, the mental, the corporeal, and the social - are necessary if he or she wishes to orient the entire self towards God.

The key question in the discussion of the various types of prayer is not, "Which one level I appropriate for me at this moment in my own spiritual growth?" but "What is the proper balance to strike among all four both within myself and within the community to which I belong?" The question becomes finding the right rhythm

so that all the various elements of my anthropological existence may be oriented towards God.

It is also important to ask ourselves what our strengths are in prayer. What aspect of prayer challenges us the most: the physical, mental, spiritual, or social? Which level of prayer are we strongest in and which do we need to develop?

V. Liturgy: Where It All Comes Together: Because this process takes place within the lived experience of Christian community, each of these forms has a special role to play in the Church's liturgical prayer. Physical: processions, singing, use of images, gestures, incense; Intellectual and Emotional: Penitential Rite, Homily. Spiritual: Need for Silence. Social: We do this together, as the Body of Christ.

The question, in other words, has moved from the area of personal choice to that of the proper dynamics of personal and communal prayer.

Conclusion: Prayer is a person's dynamic movement toward the balanced reception of the ultimate ground of reality (God) on the various anthropological levels of his or her individual and communal existence. This movement toward the reception of the divine involves finding the correct equilibrium among the spiritual, mental, physical, and social aspects of human experience.

Reflection Questions

1. How do you pray? With which form of prayer do you feel most comfortable?
2. Which form of prayer do you feel most uncomfortable with? How does it challenge you to grow?
3. What can be done to make the Liturgy a more integrated prayer experience, one that embraces every aspect of our anthropological makeup?