

There is only one kind of prayer that we can offer unconditionally: that is when we pray that we may get to heaven for the grace we need in order to get there. When this is the burden of our prayer, we know absolutely that what we ask is also what God wants. His will and our will are coincident. Our prayer in this instance certainly will be answered, provided that it possesses the fifth and last quality which is *perseverance*. The man who never quits praying is the man who is certain to go to heaven. Perseverance is essential to all prayer. We shall not grow weary if we remember that whatever God does he does in his own way and at his own best time. We may be praying for the conversion of someone dear to us, and we are tempted to discouragement because we see no sign of change in the person. Then we remember that it is the person's salvation that is the basic thing, not necessarily an outward change that will give comfort to us. If God chooses, he will answer our prayer by giving the person the grace to make a perfect contribution in the last moment of his life—when God will be glorified. Even though, regarding our prayers, other than God has not given us the same assurance of infallibility that he has given concerning our prayers for ourselves, our confidence should endure.

Indeed, not until we reach heaven and then know all that God has done shall we be aware of all the gifts and graces that have come to us in response to prayers which, at the time, seemed to go unanswered. Sometimes we can see the subtle answer here and now; quite often, not.

For whom shall I pray?

First and before all, I shall pray for myself, for the grace to live and die in the state of grace. Does that sound selfish?

It is the *right* kind of self-love, the kind of self-love that God wants us to have. Under God each of us is the keeper of our own soul, with the primary responsibility of achieving eternal union with himself for which God made us. If we neglect that responsibility, we have failed in everything. All our petitions fade into insignificance compared to the importance of our prayer for a happy death—for "the grace of perseverance," as it is called. No day should begin without some such plea as this: "Give me, O God, the graces to do your will here and to be happy with you hereafter." Allied to our prayer for a happy death should be the intention of accepting our death from the hand of God with complete resignation.

The right kind of self-love—the urgent desire to live and die in the grace of God—also is the measure of our love for our neighbor: "Love thy neighbor as thyself." Consequently, prayers for the spiritual welfare of one's neighbor take precedence over prayers for temporal favors for self. Jesus already answered the question, "Who is my neighbor?" My neighbor is anyone in need whom I can help. In matters spiritual, that embraces the entire world—and the souls in purgatory.

There are, however, varying degrees of obligation to be considered in my prayers for my neighbors. Our first duty is to those closest to us; spouses must pray for each other, parents for their children, children for their parents and for each other. At the next step removed, we must pray for our relatives and our friends—and very especially for our enemies if we have any. Our attitude dictates that we pray for our benefactors, particularly for our spiritual benefactors: our Holy Father the Pope, our bishop, our pastor, and other priests of the parish. In our effort to pray according to the mind of Christ, we shall pray for his Church, for all bishops, priests and religious, through whom Christ's work on earth must be done.

We shall pray for our country and for the officials who govern it, that they may direct wisely our nation's destiny in accordance with God's will. We shall pray (if our conscience is at all sensitive) for all who may have suffered any harm at our hands, especially for those who may have suffered spiritually through our bad example, our neglect, or our failure in charity. "Dear God, let no soul suffer or be lost through any fault of mine," is an orison that should rank high on our list. And of course we shall pray for the souls in purgatory, our neighbors who have to depend upon us so completely in their sufferings.

There are so many to pray for. Missionaries, sinners and unbelievers, besides all the others we've mentioned. A practical suggestion is to write down on a card or sheet of paper a list of all the people for whom we wish to pray and cast a quick eye over it each morning at the time of our morning prayers. If caught short, "For all on my list," will suffice.

Tom and his wife, so the story goes, were returning home from shopping. As they passed a church the wife suggested, "Tom, let's stop in and make a visit." "What's the use?" Tom answered. "We haven't got our prayer books."

It doesn't sound like a true story, admittedly. It seems hardly possible that any adult Catholic would be so naïve as to think that he could not talk to God in his own words. Some of our best prayers, we know, are those that pour out of our hearts spontaneously to God, without any thought as to the niceties of rhetoric. In fact some of our very best praying is done when we use no words at all but just fix our minds upon God with loving attention and invite God to talk to us.

But there are some basic prayers that we ought to know by heart. When we kneel in the morning, still half-drugged with sleep, it is good to be able to speak familiar words that rise easily to our lips. At nighttime, too, we often are grateful for memorized prayers that put little strain on a tired brain.

Likewise when driving the car or working at some monotonous task, remembered prayers can be repeated and still leave a bit of the mind attentive to the job at hand. In such instances, freed from the necessity of thinking how to say it, we can give our attention to the meaning of what we say. However, it should be noted that even when we make use of memorized prayers it is not essential that we advert to the actual meaning of all the words we use. We have enlisted our vocal organs in the services of God but it suffices for good prayer if our conscious mind simply directs itself to God with sentiments of faith and trust and love.

The basic prayers which should be standard equipment for every Catholic are the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Apostles' Creed, the Confiteor, the Glory be to the Father, and the Acts of Faith, Hope, Love, and Contrition.

The Our Father is the perfectly formulated prayer given to us by Jesus himself when his disciples asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray." The greater part of the Hail Mary also comes from the inspired pages of the Gospels; we cannot better address Mary than in the words with which God himself addressed her, through the archangel Gabriel and St Elizabeth.

The Apostles' Creed, in which we renew our allegiance to the principal mysteries of our Christian faith, goes back to the Church's beginning and is one of the most ancient of our prayers. The Confiteor, in which we at one and the same time confess our sinfulness and beg the intercession of all the angels and saints, is a prayer which the Church uses often in her liturgy, notably as a preparation for Mass and for Holy Communion; it is a good prayer for us at any time. The value of the Glory be to the Father as a simple prayer of praise and adoration of the most Blessed Trinity is evident. Evident also is the need to exercise, through the recitation of the Acts of Faith, Hope, and Love, the three divine virtues which were infused into our souls at baptism. The Act of Contrition we

also need, to make explicit our sorrow for our sins and our desire for God's forgiveness.

Since nothing that we do has any eternal significance unless God is working with us, it is customary for us to begin and end our prayers with the sign of the cross. The sign of the cross is both an appeal to God to make our prayers worthwhile and an act of faith in two of the most important truths of the Christian religion: the Blessed Trinity and the Redemption. When we say, "In the name of" (singular, not plural), we express our belief in the oneness of God. When we say, "the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," we state our faith in the fact that in the one God there are three divine Persons. And as we trace a cross from forehead to breast and from shoulder to shoulder, we signify our conviction that by his death on the cross Jesus Christ has redeemed mankind.

We learned as children in catechism class that we ought to pray in the morning when we get up and at night before we go to bed, before and after our meals, and in time of temptation. Morning and night and mealtimes are good memory helps, pegs, we might say, upon which to hang our prayer duty.

However, the real answer to the question, "When should we pray?" is, "Always." Jesus himself gave us that answer ("And he told... them... that they must always pray and not lose heart"—Luke 18:1) and the apostles in their Epistles have repeated that answer. We pray always when we dedicate our every moment to God and to the doing of his will. No day should begin without an offering of our day to God.

It can be in our own words: "O my God, all that I do, say, think, and suffer today I want to do, say, think, and suffer for love of you." Then must follow an attempt to make our day acceptable to God, a real effort to identify our will with his. Perhaps during the day we can occasionally renew our morning offering, especially in moments of stress. Just a reminder

to ourselves, "This is for God," will ease some rather heavy burdens.

It is not a sin to miss our morning prayers. But we lose—and lose more than we ever can regain—if we start our day without having offered it to God.

Chapter 38

The Our Father

The best prayer

If we want to learn to do something well, we ask—if we can—an expert's advice. It was with commendable wisdom, then, that one of his disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray." Christ's answer to that request was made not just to the disciple but to all mankind, to you and to me. His answer was the prayer which we commonly call the Our Father, as found in its entirety in the sixth chapter of St Matthew's Gospel.

The Our Father rightly is called the Lord's Prayer. It is given to us by our Lord himself, who is God. Who should know better than God the kind of prayer God wants us to address to him? It is no wonder that the Church makes such constant use of the Lord's prayer, both in the Mass and in other liturgical rites. It is no wonder that the Lord's Prayer is the favorite of Christians everywhere. Because we use it so often, it is important that we understand the richness of meaning in the words that we say.

"Our Father," we begin, "who art in heaven." In these few words there are encapsulated a whole complex of thoughts and sentiments. There is the awesome privilege of being able to address so familiarly as "Father" the infinitely great and holy God, the Lord of all creation. There is the thought of his love for us, for each of us individually. Out of his love for me he made me—because from all eternity he loved the image of me in his divine mind and wanted me with him in heaven. There is his love for me by which he united me to himself through sanctifying grace and made me not merely his servant but his beloved child.

There is his love for me which moves him to watch over me ceaselessly, going before me and following after me with his grace, trying by every means possible—short of taking away my freedom—to bring me safely to himself in heaven. Sometimes we forget how *personal* is God's interest in us. We let ourselves unconsciously fall into human ways of thinking about God. There are more than five and a half billion people on earth; God's attention to me (we may let ourselves feel) is bound to be somewhat divided, spread pretty thin. In feeling so, we have let ourselves forget that God is infinite, that numbers mean nothing to him. Even if I were the only person on the whole earth, God could not be more intensely and lovingly attentive to me than he is right now. It is of this that I remind myself as I say, "Our Father who art in heaven."

The word "Our" is an important word, too. The Lord's Prayer is a prayer of perfect charity: of love for God, to whom we offer ourselves unreservedly; of love for our fellow men, for whom we beseech the same graces and favors which we ask for ourselves. It is a prayer of Christian unity, of oneness under God, a prayer whose recurring theme of "our" and "we" and "us" reminds us that this is not a prayer to be said with a selfish heart.

"Hallowed be thy name," we continue, as we perform the primary duty of all prayer: the adoration and praise of God. The whole purpose of our existence is that we may give glory to God as the work of his hands and as living testimonies to his goodness and his mercy and his power. To the mute voice of inanimate nature which gives glory to God by its very existence we add the more noble praise of free hearts and tongues. There is more than an echo here of the song of the angels on Christmas night: "Glory to God in the highest!"

Yet we are not content with the praise that God is receiving. In our love for him we shall not be content until all men everywhere shall be his faithful subjects and shall join in a universal and everlasting peace. So we pray, "Thy kingdom come." We pray that God's grace may find its way into the hearts of all men, to establish there his dominion of love. We pray that Christ's words may be realized: that "there shall be one fold and one shepherd"; that Christ's visible kingdom on earth, his Church, may become the haven of all mankind. We pray, too, for the advent of his kingdom in heaven; that we and all for whom Jesus died may reign with him there in his eternal glory. The hearts and hands of missionaries all over the world are fortified as millions of us daily pray, "Thy kingdom come!"

"Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." May everyone everywhere on the face of this earth obey thee as willingly and joyfully, O God, as do the angels and saints in heaven. These are such easy words to say, especially when it is the other fellow's complete obedience to God that we pray for. But to put the words into action in the life of the one person we can most directly control—ourselves—may take some doing. Obviously, the words "Thy will be done" are pointless unless we really mean them. Making the words effective in our own personal life will mean an end to murmurings, complaints, and self-pity. It will mean a mental

throwing back of the shoulders and a chin-up approach to each day and the inevitable annoyances and disappointments which so often catch us off balance. "Thy will be done" means for me, "Whatever you want, God, I want too, no matter how much it may hurt; I'll trust to your grace to see me through!"

The Lord's Prayer has begun by focusing, as every good prayer should, upon what is due to God: his glory and praise—his glory especially through man's doing his will. Now, and only now, do we turn to our own needs.

Good parents know the needs of their children for food, clothing, shelter, toys, books, picnics, and all the rest. Nevertheless, parents are pleased when a child acknowledges the source of what comes to him so easily. Parents are pleased when a child asks for something, even though it is something which he already is slated to get. In this parents do but reflect the paternal love of God of which they are agents and the human exemplars.

It is no surprise to us, then, that the second part of the Lord's Prayer concerns itself with the needs of the one who prays. And with what beautiful simplicity does Jesus phrase it! Left to ourselves we could so easily jabber on endlessly, "Please, God, give us enough food and decent clothes and a comfortable house and a reasonably good car and good health and success in our work and new glasses and bridge-work and a pleasant vacation and... oh, yes, the graces we need to lead good lives and especially to overcome this confounded temper of mine and..."

It could develop into quite a long litany. But Jesus calmly cuts right across the whole of it and compresses it all into seven words, "Give us this day our daily bread." The word "bread" here is symbolic of all our needs, spiritual as well as physical. We can add our own personal litany if we will. Our detailed list will be a continuing acknowledgment of our dependence upon God and will be pleasing to him as a conse-

quence. But when we say, "Give us this day our daily bread," we really have said it all.

The word "daily" is a key word here, underscored by "this day." It is as though Jesus wanted us to remember, every time we recite the Our Father, that beautiful passage from his Sermon on the Mount: "Therefore I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, what you shall eat; nor yet for your body, what you shall put on.... Look at the birds of the air.... Consider how the lilies of the field grow.... How much more you, O you of little faith!" (Matt 6:25-30).

"Don't worry so," is the message that Jesus folds into the phrase "this day our daily bread"; "Don't worry about whether rain spoils tomorrow's party or whether you lose your job next week or whether that pain will turn out to be cancer. Don't you suppose that God knows the whole story, that he cares that he will be with you no matter what happens, and that never will be as bad as you fear? Today's trials are enough for anyone; ask for what you need today; you and God can take care of tomorrow when it comes."

Then comes the really hard part of the Lord's Prayer: "and forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors." It is not hard to ask God's forgiveness for our sins; but sometimes it is very hard to make God's forgiveness of us depend upon our forgiveness of someone else. This is especially true if we have suffered a genuine injury at the hands of another—if we have been betrayed by one whom we thought a friend or if someone has spread tales and damaged our reputation or if we have been treated unjustly by our boss.

Yet we *must* forgive if we expect forgiveness: "For if you forgive men their offenses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you your offenses. But if you do not forgive men, neither will your Father forgive you your offenses" (Matt 6:14-15). It is here that we put our finger on the very heart of Christian life and practice, in the ability, the willingness,

to love the sinner even while we detest his sin. "But I say to you," Christ tells us in another place, "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you; and pray for those who persecute and calumniate you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, who makes his sun to rise on the good and the evil, and sends rain on the just and the unjust" (Matt 5:44-45). It is this that marks us as Christ's own. It is this, in a modern phrase, that separates the men from the boys.

The difficulty of practicing this complete charity towards all, even towards our enemies, should convince us of the need we have of God's helping grace if we are to conquer our temptations. And so Jesus places upon our lips the concluding petitions of his prayer: "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

"Lead us not into temptation" is a turn of ancient Hebrew speech which might be paraphrased in our own idiom by saying, "Preserve us from any temptation which might be too big for us and strengthen us with your grace against the temptations which do face us." Because God, of course, does not lead anyone into a temptation to sin. God sometimes is said to tempt a person, as he tempted Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice his son Isaac. But in such instances the word "temptation" means a trial or a testing—not an allure-ment to sin. "Let no man say when he is tempted," warns St James (1:13), "that he is tempted by God; for God is no tempter to evil, and he himself tempts no one."

"Deliver us from evil." Protect us from all harm, O Father; from physical harm so far as it is in accord with your will; but especially from any harm that may touch the soul. And so ending, we have said the perfect prayer.

Chapter 39

The Bible

Do you read the Bible?

We can get to heaven without reading the Bible. If that were not so, then people who are unable to read would be in a very hopeless state. If it were necessary to read the Bible in order to get to heaven, most of the people who lived before the invention of printing (over five hundred years ago) also would find heaven closed to them.

We know that Jesus did not make salvation dependent upon the ability to read or to own a Bible. Jesus did not command his apostles, "Go and write down everything I have said so that the people can read it." Rather did Jesus say, "Go and *preach!* Go and *teach!*" His truths were to be spread (as they had to be spread before the printing press was invented) mainly by the spoken word. It is true that some of the apostles and some of their companions, such as Mark and Luke, did commit to writing many things about the life and doctrines of our Lord. But the oral teachings of the apostles are just as truly the word of God as are their written works which we find in the New Testament of the Bible.