

THE GROUND OF BESEECHING

BY

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Few paradoxes can be more important for the Christian in quest of the true life than that between the multiplicity of Christian praying and the single unity of Christian prayer. This is especially applicable to the Christian who has made some progress in grace and is beginning to live a life of union. Mother Julian in her fourteenth revelation includes a short treatise on the prayer of beseeching in order to show how that type of prayer is part and parcel of the prayer of love, which is her one prayer. But from the very first she was confronted by many forms of prayer contrasted with the simplicity of God's goodness. We 'make many means' in order to come to God, praying him by means of the Blessed Sacrament, the Precious Blood, the Passion and Death; by means of his holy Mother, the holy Cross, the special saints and the hosts of heaven. All this, Mother Julian points out, is granted us by the goodness of God. It is necessary for our nature to have many things to grasp in this life of constant change; yet in one sense it reduces itself to a single prayer.

For the goodness of God is the highest prayer, and it cometh down to the lowest part of our need. . . . It is nearest in nature and readiest in grace (c. 6, pp. 12-15).

The wonderful mosaic of liturgical prayer with all its feasts and ceremonies, the multitudinous voice of the Divine Office and the sacred ceremonies of High Mass, Vespers, the Ordination of a Priest—all these are part of man's need in prayer. It is ludicrous for the enemies of the Church to point out that God cannot benefit by such display and so many words, and that he says in the Psalm that he has no need of our sacrifices and burnt offerings (cf. Psalm 49). All these things are included in our need for God, not in God's need of us, for of course he has no needs. But even the most elevated Christian mystic requires the multiplicity of the liturgy and outward forms of prayer to support him in his one prayer. The danger of being captivated by the great variety of ecclesiastical prayer and being immersed in multiplicity remains a reality especially for the beginner, but that is only part of the general 'danger' of having a body. The multiplicity should be leading all the time to a more unified type of prayer, until for such as Mother Julian the prayer is one in the centre of the soul while still retaining the beauty of variety in its externals.

The first step in this process of unification is sacrificial; it is the prayer of the crucifixion and therefore of the Mass. That is to say the soul must first desire to abandon itself to God in union with our Lord's passion and death which overcame sin and re-introduced man into the blessed presence of God. This may be called, for lack of a better phrase, the prayer of the co-victim—the phrase is awkward in English though it shines clearly in a great deal of St Paul's language. It is of course in this framework that the whole of Mother Julian's revelations is set. It was her desire to suffer with our Lord that prepared the way for her visions—love springing from sacrifice.

I desired a bodily sight wherein I might have more knowledge of the bodily pains of our Saviour and of the compassion of our Lady and of all his true lovers that saw, that time, his pains. For I would be one of them and suffer with him (c. 2, p. 4).

Such a thirst for suffering would be unintelligible if it were left in its purely temporal context—the multiplicity of acts of mortification which in the lives of the saints repel so many modern readers. Such mortifications can only be understood fully in relation to the love of our Lord. So our Lady is the most perfect and the most potent example of the prayer of suffering in loving union with her Son.

For Christ and she were oned in love that the greatness of her loving was the cause of the greatness of her pain. For in this I saw a substance of nature's love, continued by grace, that creatures have to him; which kind love most fully showed in his sweet Mother, and overpassing; for so much as she loved him more than all other, her pains passed all other (c. 18, p. 40).

Our Lady was unique in this that all her suffering was in fact her Son's. We have to bring our own pains and mortifications to the side of Christ and so give them power and meaning; our Lady received all hers poured out upon her from Christ's side. So close is she to Christ in the union of the Passion that Mother Julian, despite her tender love and deep reverence for the Mother of God, does not actually see her but *understands* her presence in the vision of Christ's pains.

When we consider the incessant prayer of Christians directed to the Mother of God, the numerous feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the millions of rosaries recited every day, it becomes evident that she cannot be regarded as a kind of supernumerary mediator but that her mediation is that of her Son, that prayer to her is prayer in him. And Mother Julian certainly was fully in accord with this Catholic attitude to the sweet Mother of God. No Catholic can exclude the Mother when beholding the Son upon the Cross; praying at Mass he finds himself at the Mother's side receiving the gift of her motherhood from the Victim Son.

With this same cheer of mirth and joy our good Lord looked down on the right side and brought to my mind where our Lady stood in the time of his passion; and said *Wilt thou see her?* . . . And also our Lord speaketh to all mankind that shall be saved, as it were all to one person, as if he said: *Wilt thou see in her how thou art loved? For thy love I made her so high, so noble and so worthy; and this pleaseth me, and so I will that it doeth thee.* (c. 25, pp. 52-3.)

Such sound doctrine as this makes the attack on Catholic devotion to our Lady and the saints on the ground that it takes away from a personal attachment to our Lord appear as the false argument it is. All sacrifice and worship is centred in the prayer of the Cross and the more channels it finds thereto the quicker its arrival. All the prayers said by the Christian are 'Through our Lord Jesus Christ', and all reach the depths of the Trinity *Per ipsum cum ipso et in ipso*. The Canon of the Mass, deriving its words from St Paul, says that *all* honour and glory goes through him.

The Word made flesh is then the ground of all praise, the centre where all prayer is united; and we can go deeper into this aspect of the prayer of union following Mother Julian's short treatise on prayer, while declaring that 'Christ is the ground of our beseeching'.

There are those who decry the constant habit of asking things of God, preferring the more self-forgetful prayer of praise. The younger Chesterton expressed it thus:

The mountains praise thee, O Lord!

But what if a mountain said,

'I praise thee,

But put a pine-tree halfway up on the left;

It would be much more effective, believe me'.

It is time that the religion of prayer gave place to the religion of praise.¹

This is a common attitude among those who regard the prayer of petition as also taking away from the purity of their attachment to God. To ask for the innumerable things of which mankind continually stands in need would certainly seem to add multiplicity to prayer, and people will point to the ceaseless procession of novenas, candles, prayers to St Anthony or St Christopher, and so on for ever—devotions which continually preoccupy those who indulge in them. Those who would have theology behind them point to the two definitions of prayer, both deriving from St John Damascene and both used by St Thomas. The catechism gives only the general definition of what G.K. calls the 'prayer of praise'—namely, the raising of the mind and heart to God. Damascene calls prayer in

¹ Quoted from *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* by Maisie Ward, p. 58. G.K. wrote this in his notebook c. 1895 when he was 21 years old.

one place *ascensio ad Deum*. Nevertheless the definitions which St Thomas chooses from the same author to represent the essence of prayer (i.e. *oratio*) is *Petitio decentium a Deo*, the asking worthy things of God, and those who regard petition as something inferior to the prayer of praise or union should consider the way in which he relates these two definitions of Damascene: 'Prayer tends to God through being moved by the will of charity, as it were, and this in two ways: firstly, on the part of the object of our petition, because when we pray we ought principally to ask to be united to God, according to psalm 26, 4, "One thing I have asked of the Lord this will I seek after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life"; secondly, on the part of the petitioner who ought to approach the person whom he petitions, either coming to a place as when he petitions a man, or approaching in mind as when he petitions God. Hence Denis says that "when we call upon God in our prayers we unveil our mind in his presence"; and in the same sense Damascene says that "prayer is the raising up of the mind to God".' (II-II, 83, 1 ad 2.)

Mother Julian follows closely this train of St Thomas's thought and includes in her treatise on prayer, which is the kernel of her fourteenth revelation, two definitions which amount to those of petition and union given above. Thus she defines 'beseeching' (i.e. the prayer of petition) as

a true, gracious, lasting will of the soul, oned and fastened into the will of our Lord by the sweet inward work of the Holy Ghost. (p. 85.)

In the following chapter she defines 'prayer' from the point of view of the mind as a

right understanding of that fulness of joy that is to come, with well-longing and sure trust. (p. 89.)

And she includes explicitly also the prayer of thanksgiving. But we must have a right understanding of what *petitio decentium a Deo* really implies if we are to escape the over-active and ego-centric conception against which many modern writers are reacting.

If petition from God comprised some sort of attempt to bend God's will to our multitudinous desires and requirements, then certainly petitionary prayer would draw away from unity and end in a chaos of a thousand conflicting demands. It is this abuse, which is of course pure superstition, which prompts Aldous Huxley to write: 'To acquire the knack of getting his petitions answered a man does not have to know or love God. . . . All that he requires is a burning sense of the importance of his own ego and its desires, coupled with a firm conviction that there exists, out there in the universe, something not himself which can be wheedled or dragooned

into satisfying those desires.' (*Perennial Philosophy*, p. 251.) The prayer of the Christian has nothing to do with this self-centred and self-willed demand for satisfaction. Even when at the beginning of her experience Mother Julian asks for the spiritual favour of being allowed to suffer with the Son of God she does not forget that all such prayer rests on the one condition that it be the will of God, which will know no shadow of change—'nevertheless not as I will but as thou wilt'. The only petition she makes without condition is one that is clearly according to the divine will, the spiritual good of contrition and a steadfast longing for God (c. 2, pp. 4-5; compare St Thomas II-II, 83, 5.)

Without going deeply into the theology of the fulfilment and infallibility of prayer we must here remind the reader of the general principle that petition is one of the means ordained by God for reaching spiritual blessings and certain temporal ones. In asking for these things a man is therefore measuring his own will and desires upon the infinitely permanent and stable will and desires of God. Nor does this represent a sort of mechanical apparatus, as though a man were groping about for the operative switch and having laid his finger on it everything happens as planned. Supposing a man needs money urgently and prays for the amount to meet his bills; granted that it is good for him to receive this money it may well be that God has designed that this 'good' shall be acquired only by recourse to the originator of all being, the Giver of existence itself. In applying to the Giver of all good gifts the petitioner will be acknowledging his true relationship to the Creator and at the same time fulfilling the will and desire of God—whether he receives the money is of slight importance compared with this fundamental reality of the spiritual life. Again, and more obviously, a man may realise his need for charity and the more he realises his lack of this virtue the more will he turn to the author of charity, not that it can merely be 'had for the asking', as the phrase goes, but that his desire and the expression of his desire in prayer are an apt preparation for the reception of the gift which can alone come from the one who infuses grace and virtue. It would be presumption to think that one's petitions, made under the impulse of grace, were all one's own idea and execution. Our Lord tells Mother Julian that he is the source of the petition. Christian prayer is necessarily inspired by Christ:

I am ground of thy beseeching: first it is my will that thou have it, and after, I make thee to will it; and after, I make thee to beseech it and thou beseechest it. (p. 84, comp. p. 87.)

Our beseeching, Mother Julian realises, is not the cause of God's goodness to us, but on the contrary God's goodness and generosity

are the cause of our petition. Prayer makes us pliant to God, but not God pliant to us, for there is no need of this since he is 'ever alike in love' (p. 91).

The objection to this type of prayer as well as the idea that it is over active and unsuited to the higher phases of prayer derive from the confusion of regarding it as man caused and man centred. The more a man asks of God the more he realises his dependence on God for everything; the more he asks as a Christian through Christ, the ground of his beseeching; the more unified and single becomes his prayer. He is all the time praying, beseeching, that God's will may be done in his regard; he is more and more moulding his own human will upon the changeless will of God's unfathomable and infinitely tender love. And thus he 'raises his mind and heart to God'. To realise the need for so raising the mind and heart is to acknowledge a lack, a need, a dependence on the source of all good. Such acknowledgment is identical with the prayer of petition. Experience proves that those more versed in the ways of prayer and approaching nearer than most to the heights of holiness are seldom impatient with the many devotions of Christian piety. In them all they find our Lord, the Ground, drawing his simple faithful into close union with him by means of novenas and 'Agnus Deis', scapulars and blessed beads. And people can reach a very perfect form of contemplative prayer by the simple expression, repeated over and over again, of some gracious need: Lord save me, I perish; Jesus have mercy on me, a sinner; I do believe, Lord, help thou my unbelief.

Such is the teaching of the Gospels on prayer. Our Lord insists that we ask more and more vehemently and with almost unmannerly persistence, knocking and calling until our prayer is heard. When he teaches the apostles to pray without the many words of the heathen, he instructs them to make seven petitions. Even praise and worship must be couched in the terms of the petition. A man cannot stand up on his own account and offer a gift of praise, for even the gift of praise proceeds in the first instance from the giver of all good gifts. Therefore he must make a humble petition that God may be praised: 'Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done'. There is no type of prayer without this element of desire and of dependence which are the foundation of the prayer of beseeching.

The forty-third chapter of the *Revelations* is so full of sound doctrine in this connection that it is impossible to do it justice here. But it shows how the true prayer of beseeching grounded and growing in Christ leads on to unity. The chapter begins with the words 'Prayer oneth the soul to God'; and the author goes on to show how

the true petition becomes one of asking God to do what he is going to do, and that pleases him greatly. Then the desire for God grows so intense that the words of the petition fade away in the quiet beholding of the beloved.

Then we see not, for the time, what we should more pray, but all our intent with all our might is set wholly to the beholding of him. And this is an high unperceivable prayer, as to my sight; for all the cause wherefor we pray, it is oned into the sight and beholding of him to whom we pray (p. 90).

This is what St Anthony meant when he said, 'He prays best who knows not that he prays'. And when Bl. Angela of Foligno was one Lent very arid at prayer she besought God for himself, and love came to her. 'And I desired not to see nor feel nor hear any other creature, and I spoke not. But my soul spoke within me, imploring Love not to make her languish through so great love, for I reckoned life to be death.' (*Catholic Mysticism*, Thorold, p. 146.)

Dealing with the subject more scientifically and analytically St Teresa describes this prayer of union as the result of a constant seeking after God, a constant life of petition. 'While seeking God in this way the soul becomes conscious that it is fainting almost completely away, in a kind of swoon, with an exceeding great and sweet delight. . . .' (*Life*, c. 18. Peers. I, 108.) St John of the Cross, too, speaks of this gradual absorption of the many prayers in the one prayer of love, everything which the soul does or says causing it greater love and greater delight in God. (*Spiritual Canticle*, 19, 8. Peers. II, 113.)

It is fitting that a word which signifies principally the activity of asking for things should have come to be used for the generic term of all converse and communing with God; prayer means principally beseeching but it stands for every form of the raising of the mind and will to God whether it be active or passive. Christ gathers all our desires and aspirations in himself. If we expose evil desires to him, then they vanish away unable to stand in the light of his presence; so prayer purifies the desires and when we need things our Lord follows us and attunes our will to his or when caught up passively in the beholding of God we follow him, instinctively attuning ourselves (p. 91).

'The goodness of God', Mother Julian had written earlier in the book, 'is the highest prayer, and it cometh down to the lowest part of our need.' (p. 13.) And in the very last chapter when she sees finally that Love is the meaning of all her 'sights' she goes back to this treatise on prayer:

For charity pray we all to God with God's working, thanking, trusting, enjoying. For thus will our good Lord be prayed to, as by the understanding that I took in all his own meaning and in the sweet words where he saith full merrily: 'I am the Ground of thy beseeching'.²



ST NILUS, A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR OF THE FIFTH CENTURY

BY

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THOUGH the term 'spiritual director' is of modern origin, the vocation it denotes is very old. Wherever men have devoted themselves to the pursuit of perfection they have felt the need for guidance from someone more experienced than themselves. Even among those remarkable old monks and hermits that peopled the deserts of the eastern part of the Empire from the fourth century onwards, St Nilus is an outstanding figure. Perhaps his most striking characteristic is his gift for spiritual direction in the full modern sense of the word. The old legend that made him a high official at Constantinople who left the court late in life in order to become a hermit on Mt Sinai agrees ill with this office of a spiritual guide as he is represented in his many letters and several weighty treatises. But this ancient story is no longer accepted by scholars; according to their general opinion we have to think of St Nilus as the experienced superior and novice master of a monastery at Ancyra in Galatia. This is the evidence of his own writings. His great reputation caused many works to be falsely attributed to him; among them the famous *Peristeria*, the source of the legend, and the *De Oratione* which really belongs to Evagrius Ponticus. Hence the material for the presentation of his spiritual teaching will be taken from those works which modern critics acknowledge as authentic, particularly from the *Tractatus de Voluntaria Paupertate ad Magnam*, *Liber de Monastica Exercitatione*, *De monachorum Praestantia*, and the *Letters* the great majority of which are generally held to be genuine.¹

The impression these writings leave on the reader is one of sur-

² Page 244 of the Orchard Series Edition of the *Revelations*, prepared by Dom Roger Hudleston. This text is more accurate in some respects.

¹ All these works are in Migne, P.G., 79, to which volume the following citations refer.