

tions, hope the walls, and charity constitutes the roof (cf. *Q. Disp. de Spe*, a. 4, ad. 14.) We may carry on the metaphor by regarding the life within those walls as the life of prayer, springing from grace and bending in its activity the influence of faith, hope and charity. Perhaps Botticelli had this also in mind when he represented the three virtues as angels joined in exultant prayer on the roof of the shed that sheltered Mary and Joseph bowed in loving adoration over the divine Child. The wall of white rock in which the cave is set may well typify the strength and endurance of hope. The shed seems to be ringed around by a line of graceful trees set in a green meadow and pointing their leafy green branches upwards towards the sky. We may see in this a symbol of the upward striving of the soul drawn towards God by hope, and of the abundance and fruitfulness of life that flows from hope. For under that roof was born he who is the life of the soul, whose coming to save us is the clearest evidence that our hope is well-founded. We may well take the place in the picture of the oncoming shepherds and pilgrims who are welcomed and led in by embracing angels—so similar to those of Fra Angelico who welcome the blessed into heaven—to cast themselves at the feet of our Lord, there to join in the prayer of Mary and Joseph. They too were ‘looking for the blessed hope and coming of the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ’. (Titus 2, 13.)



PRAYER¹

BY

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IN prayer we have to manufacture our own prayer. ‘Prayer is the raising up of the mind and heart to God’—not *the* mind and heart but *my* mind and heart; it is personal—at least, it should be. It is an art like anything else is—an art to be learnt, not some special gift given to one and not to another. We all have it; some have it and don’t use it. Take any other gift—memory, reasoning, will-power—we all have them to a certain

¹ From notes taken at a conference.

degree. Those who have it least need most training in it. Why doesn't God make us all the same? We don't know; it is God's way to make us different. We all have the gift of prayer in some way, to some degree. The man with only one talent did not use it. Why? Fear! A desperate thing, fear, isn't it? It paralyses. Our responsibility if we have little talent for prayer is in some ways greater. We have to work. We cannot slip through the spiritual life. Other things we pass through and forget.

We ought to be better each year. Are you better? You should be. If you used French every day and spoke it constantly, you would improve your French; so in prayer you should be able to express yourself better. Do we take trouble? Do we look back and see how we have improved in the past year? 'Teach me how to pray'—what a pathetic question on the lips of the apostles! We all need to ask the question, though no one can teach us; they must be our own prayers mustn't they? Often this is where we go astray and make our private prayers prayers such as might spring from the lips of anyone. It is difficult. Odd isn't it, that in our everyday life it is difficult to keep silence? We can talk for hours, talk to the same people—but to God, no. Why? Why should it be difficult to talk to him? Partly because our imaginations are not stimulated by sight; he is not visible. God is so vague; there are no external helps. It is always more difficult to talk to God, but it ought not to be difficult. We talk easily but pray badly because we do not talk in prayer enough; we recite, we speak *at* God, not *to* God. Prayer must be familiar—talk, chatter, the unfolding of our heart; it should not be artificial. No one on earth would ever stand being spoken to as we speak to God. 'O Thou'—publicly, yes, but not privately, it is artificial. *Talk*, don't merely present grand phrases. Our prayers are never enough human, never enough *ourselves*. We are creatures of imagination; drop that stilted fashion!

We are distracted. Why? What about? Something or somebody? I am interested in something else. Interested, are you? Yes. Well, what does that really mean? Are you trying to pray about what interests you most, or are you trying to speak of what you think ought to be spoken of? We should pray about what really interests us—distractions, yes; pray about them.

Our prayers must be natural, not making conversation, afraid of a pause. It is a wonder that we do not speak of the weather to God! Talk of the things that really interest you, the vivid things in your life. I never get clearer, you say? Never mind, *talk*. He must be interested if he loves me; we are interested in those we love, interested in anything to do with them. A great number of distractions would never come if we talked of what we ought to do.

Children pray really personal prayers. We should get away from pretence and pray about what we really want. Don't pray for what you don't want. You pray for suffering—and the whole house knows when it comes! Prayer should be familiar talk that runs backwards and forwards between God and us. Be truthful. A novice once prayed to die, and was kept awake by the fear that he might die in the night. Be honest, and if you don't want a thing, say so. He, the most perfect of all, did not want to die—and said so to his Father. God must be bored! He wants to come down to our hearts, but we hold him at arm's length. We must try to be honest with God—to be ourselves. Everything conspires to make us alike, which is a horrible prospect; and we are afraid of being ourselves, of being natural—perhaps rightly so at other times(!), but not in prayer; we need not fear with God. Each one of us then must give our whole heart and mind, and no other heart and mind in the whole world; for no other heart and mind is like mine; it may perhaps be like, but it is not the same, and God asks for this heart—*my* heart—with its fitful fever. He wants *my* heart and *my* mind and *my* language. It may be uncouth, but it is *mine*, *my own*, that he wants.

I may learn the prayers of saints and *sometimes* I find what expresses my heart, but to use none else is to miss the very point of prayers. Take the prayers of St Catherine, of St Teresa: it would be wonderful if we could use their language; they soar, we creep. It is the language of our own hearts that God wants. 'How shall we pray?' Our Lord answered that question and said, 'Thus'—not 'this'. 'Thus therefore shall you pray: Our Father'—that most perfect prayer. We can all use it and mean it, but it is only the model after all. Our prayers must be built with our own hands—the *one* thing I can offer for myself, from myself.

We have to learn prayer. Is there nothing you want? no ambition? no desire? no one in peril? no distress in the world? Isn't your heart torn? Life has many shadows. Well, is there nothing to thank God for? no dear friends, no children, no birds, no song in your life? The things we want, the things he has given us—why, that alone would give us work for eternity! Is there still nothing? Then forget yourself, leave that behind and think of him, his life, his goodness, splendour, generosity, mercy. Why, here there is work for eternity! Isaias and John caught a glimpse of heaven and heard 'Holy, holy, holy'. Seeing and praising God was ample work for eternity. If we have not anything in our own heart, no petition, no thanksgiving, there is yet the highest of all, praise. There is almost too much; the difficulty is where to start. Oh yes, you do know what to pray about. What is your distraction? That will focus your attention; make that the subject of your prayer.

Prayer is an art to study, not so much the rules, but my own life, the things that hold me, interest me—put these in God's hands. Prayer knits our lives up with God. Little simple things take on a new hue: the world is full of God. That is how we get strength and courage. Prayer is the cry of a heart to God. Sometimes in that heart there is suffering, sometimes petition; sometimes a heart is amazed at the wonder of his greatness. We cannot afford to let the light of prayer flicker out; we must strive to become as effective in prayer as we are in the job God has given us to do. We have studied our work and really are efficient. What lasts beyond this life must be worth while. Seek God and his justice and the other things will follow. I must watch myself with the people I am fond of—how do I talk? That is what God wants; that is how he wants me to talk to him. He does not want books; he never wrote a book. He wants just us; he loves us! That is the only mystery in life; and loving us he loves everything about us, our silly little dreams, our ambitions, just our talk; the things that frighten us. Nothing is little to him. He is in love; and once we are in love nothing is little. Love makes great things little and little things great. Love enlarges, governs, and sets the dull world on fire. Prayer is infinitely great. We must study our prayer and improve and remember that the only person we can learn from is *ourselves*.