

Text for the Times:

Prayer Continued

Most of us are experiencing new insights into the liturgical prayer of the Church with the reform and introduction of the vernacular into the liturgy, and gain great joy from it. We ought to remind ourselves that this joy of being in communion with God through Christ can be ours all the time and must be so if we follow the teaching of Christ. St Ambrose, bishop of Milan in the fourth century when liturgical life was flourishing, preached the same theme to his newly baptised converts as the Second Vatican Council does to us today.

The spiritual life is not only contained in participation in the liturgy. Certainly the Christian is called to pray in community, but nevertheless he ought to enter into his chamber to pray to his Father in secret, further, as the Apostle teaches, we ought to pray without ceasing.

Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Sacred Liturgy, 12

Now listen to how we ought to pray. Prayer has many good qualities. Where you should pray is not insignificant or a question of little importance. The Apostle says: 'I desire then that in every place the men should pray raising holy hands without anger or quarrelling'. And the Lord says in the gospel: 'But when you pray, enter into your chamber and shut the door and pray to your Father.' Doesn't it seem to you that there is a contradiction? The Apostle says, Pray in every place: and the Lord says, Pray within your chamber. But there is no contradiction. First of all we will discuss this, and then how you ought to begin a prayer, in what order you should divide it up, what you should bring forth and set out, how you should bring prayer to a close, then for whom you should pray. Let us learn all these things.

First of all, where ought you to pray? Paul seems to say one thing, the Lord another. Could Paul give a teaching contrary to the precepts of Christ? Surely not. Why? Because he is not opposed to Christ but is His interpreter. 'Be imitators of me', he said, 'as I am of Christ.' Then what? You can pray everywhere and in your chamber always pray. You have your chamber everywhere. Even if you have been placed among the Gentiles or among the Jews, everywhere you have your secret chamber. Your chamber is your interior disposition. Even when in the midst of the people you can keep your chamber in the interior man secret and private.

But when you pray enter into your chamber. You will find this here and

elsewhere : 'Go my people and enter your chambers, hide yourself a while until the anger of the Lord is past'. This the Lord has spoken through the prophet Isaias. Moreover in the gospel he says : 'But when you pray enter into your chamber and shut the door and pray to your Father.'

What is the significance of shutting the door ? What door do we have ? Hear and understand what door you have which you ought to shut when you pray. Would that women might understand it. You have already heard that the holy David has taught you, saying : 'Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord, keep watch over the door of my lips'. There is a door in another place which the Apostle Paul spoke of when he said : 'That God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ'. That is to say, when you pray do not cry out, nor make your prayer diffusive, nor scatter it about among the crowd. Pray in secret, secure in the knowledge that he can hear you in secret who sees all things and hears everything. Pray to your Father who is in secret. For he who sees in secret, hears your prayer.

But let us ask what value this has, why we ought rather to pray in secret than with a loud proclamation. Listen, let us take an example from the practice of men. If you ask someone who is quick to hear, you don't think it necessary to shout, but you ask gently in a moderate tone. If you ask someone who is deaf, do you not begin to shout so that he can hear you ? The man who shouts thinks God can only hear those who shout and when he asks he belittles God's power. But he who prays in silence shows his faith and confesses that God is the searcher of minds and hearts and that he hears your prayer before you have poured it forth from your mouth.

St Ambrose : from De Sacramentis, bk 6, ch. 3-4

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