

Talk on Prayer

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Joseph A. Komonchak

I see the purpose of this talk as that of presenting some idea of what prayer is about, rather than as giving some guides to method in teaching children or, for that matter, adults, how to pray. The two in the end will be discovered to be mutually dependent, but that is something to return to later.

I thought I should say some things about prayer in the New Testament and especially in the teaching of Jesus, not that later ideas on prayer are not important, but because these must be judged by the biblical revelation. ~~There is a tendency, which perhaps we must regard as inevitable, to regard our present knowledge and opinion as infallible.~~

The first thing we may notice is that Jesus Himself prayed, a fact recorded by all the Evangelists and by the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. He used to get up early and go out alone to pray. The night before he chose the Apostles he spent in prayer. He frequented the synagogue. He prayed for Peter that his faith not fail. Above all he prayed in the agony of His Passion.

Now none of this is new, but I think we have a tendency to overlook its significance. We believe Jesus to be the Son of God, and our insistence on that fact often prevents our taking His humanity seriously. We say He prayed in order to show us that we have to pray, as if were something Jesus did only for our sakes. We overlook the fact that Jesus was a man, that the New Testament speaks of Him as developing, as being perfected through the decisions and acts that made up the course of His life. A necessary part of that development and perfecting was the prayer through which He praised His Father, gave Him thanks, begged to be freed from death, asked the reason for His suffering, and surrendered Himself into his Father's hands. It is heretical to say that Jesus did not mean these prayers. Reread Hebrews 5:7:

“In the days of his earthly life he offered up prayers and petitions, with loud cries and tears, to God who was able to deliver him from the grave. Because of his humble submission, his prayer was heard: son though he was, he learned obedience in the school of suffering and, once perfected, became the source of salvation for all who obey him.”

The phrase, “loud cries and tears,” recalls the agony in the Garden and the distress of Jesus in accepting His Father's will. One scholar remarks: “The crux of all prayer in the Bible is the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane, where surrender is yet addressed to God as Father (Mk 14:36)” (*IDB*, III, 862). “Abba, Father,” he said, “all things are possible to you; take this cup away from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” There are indications that “Abba” was the usual way in which Jesus addressed God, and a good deal of the Gospel is implied in that single fact. For “Abba” is the word a small child used in addressing his father, an unheard-of familiarity when used of God. Some sense of the intimacy it implies between Jesus and His Father may be expressed by translating it “Dear Father,” but the startling novelty of it can only be sensed by translating it with the American equivalent: “Daddy.”

The Aramaic word itself provides us with the transition from the prayer of Jesus to His teaching on prayer, for when His disciples asked him to teach them to pray, he told them to begin

by calling God “Father, *Abba*.” The awe they must have felt in so addressing God can still be seen in the texts of St. Paul where he gives as a proof of our sonship before God the fact that he has given us a Spirit in whom we cry out, “Abba! Father!” and in the moment at Mass when our praying the Lord’s Prayer is introduced with the words, “We dare to say.”

Now if one of your concerns today is the question of formal prayer as opposed to spontaneous, it is perhaps not irrelevant that two versions of the Lord’s Prayer have come down to us and that neither, in all probability, represents the actual wording of Jesus. St. Matthew’s version, the one we say every day, probably is closer to Christ’s intention, but St. Luke’s is probably closer in wording and length.

In St. Matthew’s Gospel, the Lord’s Prayer is introduced as a concrete example of the way in which the disciples of Jesus are to pray. You will recall that Jesus had warned that we were not to make a show of our religion and immediately illustrates the meaning with regard to almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.

When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; they love to say their prayers standing up in synagogues and at the street-corners, for everyone to see them. I tell you this: they have their reward already. But when you pray, go into a room by yourself, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is there in the secret place, and your Father who sees what is secret will reward you.

In your prayers do not go babbling on like the pagans who imagine that the more they say the more likely they are to be heard. Do not imitate them. Your Father knows what your needs are before you ask them.

The Lord’s Prayer follows as an example of how we are to pray. In the immediate context, it is proposed as a model of the simple prayer as opposed to the pagans interminable babbling by which they multiplied the names and titles of their gods to make sure that none was overlooked. Now it is difficult to deny that some Catholic prayers more closely resemble such attempts than the simplicity of the Lord’s Prayer, and there is a point to re-examining their purpose. Jesus’ teaching about prayer does not see it as a meritorious achievement because of which God will hear our pleas, and if our litanies are built on that premise, perhaps, again, we ought to re-examine them.

It is characteristic of the prayer Jesus proposed for us that it should have the simple confidence of a child approaching a Father who loves him dearly. He is one, Jesus says, who already knows what we need before we ask Him. “Is there one among you,” He says further on in the Sermon on the Mount, “who will offer his son a stone when he asks for bread, or a snake when he asks for fish? If you, then, bad as you are, know how to give your children what is good for them, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask Him!”

Might I suggest that in teaching children to pray, we make use of the concrete sayings and images of Jesus? They appeal directly to the heart and affections and, I should think, would evoke a spontaneous reaction.

The two famous parable in St. Luke’s Gospel—the persistent friend (Lk 11:5-10) and the unjust judge and the widow (Lk 11:1-5) are designed to teach not primarily the necessity of persevering in prayer as that we are addressing a God who is sure to hear us. (Read them.)

In further connection with the idea of confidence before the Father, I might bring in a word

of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel where Jesus says that it is not even necessary for him to pray for us: “When that day comes you will make your request in my name, and I do not say that I will pray to the Father for you, for the Father loves you himself.” This sense that we can confidently approach God Himself is one of the most precious realities of the Christian life throughout the New Testament, especially in St. Paul’s Epistles and the Epistle to the Hebrews. “In Christ,” Paul says, “we have access to God with freedom, in the confidence born of trust in him.” It is most necessary that we communicate this sense of free confidence before God; the value of Jesus, or Mary, or the saints as interceding for us is not so that they can appease an unapproachable, mysterious, angry Father, and any explanation of prayer to these figures must begin with the knowledge that “the Father loves us Himself.” “Let us therefore boldly approach the throne of our gracious God” (Heb 4:16).

Now there is some point in noting some of the things Jesus suggests should be the object of our prayers. The Lord’s Prayer is a prayer for the full coming of the Kingdom of God with the return of Jesus and the consummation of the world—the same prayer with which the Apocalypse closes the Bible: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” It cannot be an object of pride for us that an event for which the New Testament Church prayed and hoped intensely, so far from being an object of our prayer, is more usually a cause of terror. The child who is afraid of Christ’s Second Coming has not yet learned to love him.

Perhaps most characteristic of the object of Christian prayer must be that we are told by Jesus, “Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors.” “Bless those who curse you.” This is no easier than forgiving them, but just as basic to Christianity. There is a point, for instance, in having children pause and silently pray for some particular person who has harmed them—or to have them pray for Communists. No Christian can hate his enemy.

In speaking of Jesus and prayer, I began by speaking of the fact that Jesus prayed while on earth and at the hour of his death. I may conclude these notes by remarking that St. John and the Epistle to the Hebrews represent Jesus as praying for us now in heaven. We ought not forget that Jesus has not ceased to be a man in heaven and that with human love and interest He now prays for us Himself. “He is always living to intercede on our behalf.” The priestly prayer of chapter 17 in the Fourth Gospel is phrased in terms that imply that Jesus is already in heaven, and many scholars regard the prayer as a model of the prayer he now offers in heaven. Somewhere, in one of Karl Rahner’s essays, I remember reading that the meaning of the devotion to the Sacred Heart is precisely that Jesus stands by our side before the Father—Man with men. In this line also, it is helpful to recall the teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews that the priesthood of Jesus reaches its culmination and continues forever in heaven—and his sacrifice is a prayer.

Finally, an aspect not clearly brought out in the Gospels: Prayer in the New Testament is not restricted to words and ideas, but the Christian life is described as itself sacrifice and prayer. Thus in Rom 12:1: “Therefore, my brothers, I implore you by God’s mercy, to offer your very selves to him, a living sacrifice dedicated and fit for his acceptance, the worship offered by mind and heart.” Or Heb 13:15-16: “Through Jesus, then, let us continually offer up to God the sacrifice of praise, that is, the tribute of lips which acknowledge his name, and never forget to show kindness and to share what you have with others; for such are the sacrifices which God approves.” It is only along these lines that one can give a reasonable explanation of the command thrice made in the New Testament that we are to “pray without ceasing.” That is the way St. Thomas speaks: “The man who does good

without cease prays without cease.”

Now, that has been a rather brisk excursion through the teaching of Jesus on prayer. I don't pretend to have hit upon all the elements of the New Testament doctrine of prayer, but perhaps they can suggest some ideas on what to teach children about their prayer.

First of all, prayer arises out of the new situation Jesus has introduced so that its primary expression is gratitude. And gratitude ought to be initially at least the spontaneous joy of recognition of God's love.

In every form of prayer, however, what is first and last required is that it be sincere. For this it is necessary first that the heart mean the prayer, but secondly also, that the prayer be an adequate expression of the heart's sentiments.

Which brings us some of the way toward a problem I have been told to anticipate—the relationship of formal and spontaneous prayer. Without giving definitive answers, may I suggest the following:

1) A distinguishing characteristic of Christianity is freedom, and not only freedom from sin but also from law. By this is meant that the Christian ought do a particular thing not because of a command of God, but because it is right and thus corresponds to the spontaneous thrust of his Christian existence.

2) There are times when a person's inability to use a formal prayer is his own fault—through sin or laziness—and this should not be used as an excuse for eliminating formal prayer.

3) But there is also the fact that full Christian appreciation is not something given at birth, but develops through the course of a life. Now there are many formal prayers which are not a proper vehicle for a child's imperfect appreciation of God. You are all familiar with the famous mistakes children make in memorizing the Lord's Prayer or the Act of Contrition, etc. People—children too—don't make such mistakes when they are saying something they understand.

4) The value I see in teaching children formal prayer is first of all a certain need for it in liturgical worship and, secondly, that it provides them with the classical framework for the expression of the adult Christian consciousness we hope they one day will have.

5) It is far more important that a child's real appreciation of Christianity be given expression in prayer than that he follow a set form of prayer. Why, for instance, do we tell them to say a “Hail Mary” to obtain a favor? Why do we not urge them to pray directly for the favor in their own language?

6) In many places, spontaneous bidding prayers are offered by members of the congregation at Mass. Cannot something similar be attempted with children? A class can pray well together prayers they know express one another's needs and desires.

7) Is there not also a place for silent, individual prayer to be followed by a student's summation of their intentions, as at Mass in the Collect?

Finally, it may be to the point to recall that we are not left solely to our own resources when we struggle with the question of how to pray:

The Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness. We do not even know how we ought to pray, but through our inarticulate groans the Spirit himself is pleading for us, and God who

searches our inmost being knows what the Spirit means, because he pleads for God's own people in God's own way (Rom 8:26-27).