

ticed in the past made it somewhat easier, I guess, to bear the ordeals of hunger we endured during those prison years. At least for me the experience was not new, except in its intensity. And I learned soon enough that prayer does not take away bodily pain or mental anguish. Nevertheless, it does provide a certain moral strength to bear the burden patiently. Certainly, it was prayer that helped me through every crisis.

Gradually, too, I learned to purify my prayer and remove from it the elements of self-seeking. I learned to pray for my interrogators, not so they would see things my way or come to the truth so that my ordeal would end, but because they, too, were children of God and human beings in need of his blessing and his daily grace. I learned to stop asking for more bread for myself, and instead to offer up my sufferings, the pains of hunger that I felt, for the many others in the world and in Russia at that time who were enduring similar agony and even greater suffering. I tried very hard not to worry about what tomorrow would bring, what I should eat, or what I should wear, but rather to seek the kingdom of God and his justice, his will for me and for all mankind.

"Thy will be done." That was the key, but only slowly did I come to experience how perfect a prayer is the Our Father, the Lord's Prayer. "Lord, teach us how to pray", the disciples had said, and in his answer the Lord had explained the whole theology of prayer in the most simple terms, exhaustive in its content and yet intended for the use of all men without distinction. The human mind could not elaborate a better pattern in prayer than the one the Lord himself gave us.

He begins by placing us in the presence of God. God the almighty, who has created all things out of nothingness and keeps them in existence lest they return to nothingness, who rules all things and governs all things in the heavens and on earth according to the designs of his own providence. And yet this same all-powerful God is our Father, who cherishes us and looks after us as his sons, who provides for us in his own loving kindness, guides us in his wisdom, who watches over us daily to shelter us from harm, to provide us food, to receive us back with open arms when we, like the prodigal, have wasted our inheritance. Even as a

father guards his children, he guards us from evil—because evil does exist in the world. And just as he can find it in his Father's heart to pardon us, he expects us to imitate him in pardoning his other sons, our brothers, no matter what their offenses.

The-Our Father is a prayer of praise and thanksgiving, a prayer of petition and of reparation. It encompasses in its short and simple phrases every relation between man and his Creator, between us and our loving, heavenly Father. It is a prayer for all times, for every occasion. It is at once the most simple of prayers and the most profound. One could meditate continuously on each word and phrase of that formula and never fully exhaust its riches. If one could only translate each of its phrases into the actions of his daily life, then he would indeed be perfect as his heavenly Father clearly wishes him to be. Truly, the Lord's Prayer is the beginning and end of all prayers, the key to every other form of prayer.

If we could constantly live in the realization that we are sons of a heavenly Father, that we are always in his sight and play in his creation, then all our thoughts and our every action would be a prayer. For we would be constantly turning to him, aware of him, questioning him, thanking him, asking his help, or begging his pardon when we have fallen. And every true prayer begins precisely here: placing oneself in the presence of God. It is a phrase all spiritual writers use, it is a concept each may visualize in his own way, but the realization of it in practice is sometimes most difficult to achieve. Words do not make a prayer, even the words of the Our Father taught us by our Lord himself, or the words of any other familiar prayer made easy by constant repetition. There is no formula that works of itself, no magic charm that must automatically be heard by God and produce its effect. Prayer, true prayer, is a communication—and it occurs only when two people, two minds, are truly present to each other in some way. So in prayer we must do more than merely visualize God as present as some sort of father figure. His fictionalized presence will not do; his imaginative presence will not do. By faith we know that God is present everywhere and is always present to us if we but turn to him. So it is we who must put ourselves in God's presence, we who must turn to him in faith, we who must leap beyond an

image to the belief—indeed the realization—that we are in the presence of a loving Father who stands always ready to listen to our childish stories and to answer to our childlike trust.

It sounds so easy when spiritual writers describe it or novice masters speak of it. In fact, on those rare occasions when it does happen, prayer is easy. Conversation with God comes easily whenever God is felt—there are no other words to describe the experience—to be present to the soul. But the human mind is so easily distracted. What is more, it is so easily deceived. It can say the proper words and utter pious formulas as easily as a dog can “speak” for its supper. It has learned what to say, and it will say the proper formula upon the proper cue. Yet such rote formulas are, in and of themselves, no more prayers than are the poor dog’s barkings truly speech. God may hear and understand, as we may hear and feed the dog; some minimal communication has been achieved and no effort goes unrewarded with the Lord. But we have not, for all that, truly learned how to pray.

Real prayer occurs, as I have said, when at last we find ourselves in the presence of God. Then every thought becomes the father to a prayer, and words quite often are superfluous. Such prayer is all-absorbing. Once you have experienced it, you can never forget the experience. But I am not speaking here of some great mystical grace. I am speaking only of a conversation with God, the spontaneous outpouring of a soul that has come to realize—however fleetingly—that it is standing at the knee of a loving and providing Father. Thoughts of praise and of thanksgiving spontaneously arise, as well as questions and petitions and thoughts of friends and their needs, mingled with trusting confessions of failure and simple promises to follow in the future only what he would have us do.

Sometimes, by God’s grace, such a moment of insight and of prayer occurs almost unexpectedly. But for the most part, prayer demands an effort on our part. We must learn, even as Christ himself did, to draw apart from the circumstances that surround us if we wish to be alone with the Father. In the desert, in the mountains, in the fields, he simply retired, leaving his apostles and disciples and the crowds that followed him, in order to pray to the

Father. And for us, especially, it is easier to find ourselves alone with the Father if we can be physically alone, if we can retire to a place of quiet where we can collect our thoughts.

Because the restless human mind, our chief instrument in all human communications, is also our chief stumbling block to prayer. It seems by nature bent upon distraction rather than on recollection. It prefers to be free, to wander ceaselessly, to seize on each new idea and explore its every direction rather than to fashion its attention upon one direction and remain pinned down. It wants to be forever occupied, constantly at work, worrying, remembering, planning and scheming, preventing and arguing, searching and questioning—even, in our attempts to pray, taking to itself God’s part and answering our every petition, carrying on by itself all sides of our attempt at a divine conversation. Or it will flare up with pride, impatience, ill feeling, bitterness, or hate when least we want it to; it will feel injured or offended, guilty or discouraged, just when we have almost reached our goal. Sometimes, indeed very often, the time we have set aside for prayer passes simply in a struggle to control our restless mind, collect our thoughts, and focus our attention upon God. And it is helpful and consoling on such occasions to remember two things: (1) that God himself has initiated this conversation by inspiring us to set aside the time for prayer; and (2) that he appreciates our efforts to respond, and he blesses them.

Posture, like verbal formulas, is not essential to prayer. Perseverance is. Kneeling is not necessarily more conducive to prayer than sitting, nor is standing necessarily better than lying down. Yet mortal man is a peculiar thing made up of body and soul; so our efforts to control the mind can often be connected with an effort at bodily control. Relax the body and the mind goes running off to recreation. We are creatures of habit, and we can sometimes help ourselves achieve a sort of self-control that leads more readily to recollection by taking up a posture we traditionally associate with prayer. Such an effort, moreover, such perseverance is an earnest of our desire to respond to God’s promptings and to do his will. An attitude of readiness to try over and over again in our quest to find God and his will in prayer is itself a grace and a