

## FIRST PART

# Prayer in General



## CHAPTER I

### Prayer and Especially Vocal Prayer

#### 1. NOTION OF PRAYER IN GENERAL

In its widest sense, “prayer is an elevation of the soul to God.”<sup>8</sup> This formula, borrowed from St. John Damascene, has become classical.

The soul, therefore, leaves aside the useless thoughts, the nothings, the frivolities which too often invade it; it abandons the thoughts which are good at another time, such as all questions of business, of work, of office; it raises itself above the earth and the things of earth; its mind and its affections ascend to heaven; they stop not even at the choirs of Angels and of Saints, unless indeed, our prayer is directly addressed to them; they ascend even to God—they rest in God, *ascensus mentis in Deum*. There, fixed in God, we look affectionately at God, we enter into conversation with God, and God deigns to listen to us with love, as a father to his children, and to reply to us by granting us interior lights and affections. Oh, to what a height does prayer raise the soul, and what an honor it is for a being sprung from nothing!

Prayer, in its widest sense, does four things: it adores, asks pardon, gives thanks, and begs for graces.

(1) It adores. By prayer we kneel before the infinite Majesty and perfections of God, making ourselves quite little; we contemplate,

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8. St. John Damascene, *De Fide Orth.*, 3.24.

admire, believe, hope, have confidence, love, praise, rejoice in the glory which God finds in himself and in his creatures; we are afflicted to see him so little known and so much offended, desire to glorify him and make him glorified, and arm ourselves with a holy zeal. Or, considering God as its Creator and its sovereign Master, the devout soul adores him and subjects itself humbly to him, it admires and blesses the ways of Providence, it resolves to obey, and even reaches to the height of abandoning itself with confidence and love into the hands of God.

(2) It asks pardon. Recalling all its years in the bitterness of a contrite and humbled heart, the soul confesses its faults before God, feels shame and confusion, expresses its repentance, appeals to the Divine mercy, takes salutary resolutions, performs penance, and accepts willingly the austerities prescribed by the Rule and the crosses sent by Providence.

(3) It traces up to God with thanksgiving all the general and particular benefits which it has received from him. And often, while it overflows with sentiments of gratitude, struck by the Divine goodness and infinite charity of which all these benefits are the manifestation, it rises easily from gratitude to love, thus discharging the primary function of prayer.

(4) Finally, the soul begs new graces, temporal and spiritual, for herself and for all who are dear to her, pleading in turn the cause of God himself, of his Church, militant or suffering, of her own country, of the clergy and religious, especially of her own order, of the just and of sinners, etc., etc.

To repeat, prayer is an elevation of the soul to God, to adore him, to thank him, to beg pardon and ask for graces.

Schram<sup>9</sup> makes a very just remark which he borrows from Suarez.<sup>10</sup> “Prayer can apply itself to any one of the acts we have just enumerated in preference to any of the others. Nay, more, vocal or mental prayer, however prolonged, may limit itself to a single one of these acts because there is no obligation nor necessity to join them always together, and also because it may happen that more fruit, more fervor and devotion may be derived from the continuous dwelling upon a single one than from dwelling upon them all at one time. In such a case we ought to

9. Schram, *Theol. Myst.*, ed. Vivès, 1874, 1.22.2.

10. Suarez, *De Relig.*, 2.3.

confine ourselves to that one which is more profitable, without trying to go through them all in the one prayer.”

It must, however, be noted, that, if we confine ourselves to praising, to thanking God, and expressing our repentance for the past, we have indeed performed excellent acts of virtue, but we have not been praying, in the strictest sense of the word, for the first three functions belong to prayer only when taken in its widest sense. In its strictest sense, it consists in petition, and may be then defined with St. John Damascene, “the asking of seemly things from God,”<sup>11</sup> that is, things which may glorify God and do good to our soul, and hence which are conformable to the Divine good-pleasure. It is also defined: an act by which the intelligence, as interpreter of the will, expresses a desire of the soul and strives to induce God to grant it to us.

Prayer, considered as petition, consists entirely in expressing to God some desire in order that he may hear it favorably. A real desire is, therefore, its primary and essential condition; without this, we are merely moving the lips, going through a form of words which is not the expression of our will, and thus our prayer is only an appearance without reality. The way, then, to excite ourselves to pray, to put life and fervor into our prayer, and to make of it a cry which, breaking forth from the depths of the soul, penetrates even to heaven, is to conceive the real desire mentioned above, to excite it, to cherish it; for the fervor of our prayer will be in proportion to the strength of the desire we have to be heard; just as what we have but little at heart we ask for only in a half-hearted way, if even we ask it at all; so what we desire with our whole soul we ask for with words of fire, and plead for it before God with an eloquence that is very real.

## 2. VOCAL PRAYER AND MENTAL PRAYER

Leaving aside whatever belongs not to our present subject, we will confine ourselves to saying that prayer is divided into vocal and mental.

*Vocal prayer* is that which is made by using words or signs, or, perhaps, more exactly by using some approved form of words, which we read or recite, such as the divine office, the beads, the Angelus, grace before and after meals, etc. *Mental prayer* is that which is made without employing either words or formulas of any kind.

A large share is given to the former in our daily exercises. The

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11. *De Fide Orth.*, 3.24.

liturgical prayers are imposed by the laws of the Church; by our rules also we are enjoined certain vocal prayers; and others, like the beads, are in such constant use amongst the faithful generally that a good religious would not wish to omit them. Vocal prayer is not to be despised, for, if well made, it pays to God the homage of our body as well as that of our soul. A heart full of devotion pours itself out quite naturally in words and signs which express externally its interior sentiments; on the other hand, when there is need to excite such sentiments, these pious formulas fix the attention of the mind, and call forth the devotion of the heart. "It is for this reason," says St. Thomas, "we must, in private prayer, make use of these words and signs as far as they are useful to arouse the mind interiorly; but if they should end by distracting it or causing it any hindrance, we must cease to make use of them, and this is the case especially of those whose mind is sufficiently prepared for devotion without these external expressions."<sup>12</sup>

This last observation of St. Thomas shows to what extent each one ought to devote himself to vocal prayer outside prayers of obligation or those prescribed by the rules. According to Schram, for those who are not called to a more elevated prayer, vocal prayer well made may well suffice to enable them to lead a Christian and even a perfect life, especially if they are urged to this by a special movement from God an impulse which may be recognized by its effects. Nay more, St. Bonaventure recommends vocal prayers to the more devout, that they may have the good custom of ruminating them when their devotion flags.

St. Teresa knew several who from vocal prayer were raised by God to a very sublime degree of contemplation. "I know," says she, "a person who never being able to pray otherwise than vocally, was yet in possession of all the other degrees of prayer. . . . She came to me one day much afflicted at not being able to make mental prayer nor to apply herself to contemplation, finding herself reduced to saying only some vocal prayers. I asked her what they were, and I found that while saying continually the *Pater*, she used to enter into so high a contemplation that it was evident Our Lord raised her even to divine union; and her actions indeed showed it, for she lived a holy life. So I praised Our Lord and envied such a vocal prayer."<sup>13</sup> That does not prevent the saint from strongly urging mental prayer upon her daughters, and even telling

12. *Summa*, 2.2.83.12.

13. *Way of Perfection*, 31.

them that they should make every effort to arrive at mystical contemplation if it is God's will. Religious will generally derive more profit from practicing mental prayer, all the more because a considerable part of their time is already devoted to the exercise of vocal prayer in common. At all events, it is better to recite fewer vocal prayers, and to say them with recollection and devotion, than to try to get through a great number hastily; neither should we take upon us so many as to end by being disgusted. And "if during vocal prayer," says St. Francis of Sales, "you feel your heart drawn and invited to interior or mental prayer, refuse not to follow this attraction, but allow your thoughts to flow freely in that direction, and be not troubled at not having finished the vocal prayers which you had intended to say; for the mental prayer which you will make in their stead will be more agreeable to God and more useful to your soul."<sup>14</sup> Vocal prayers of obligation, however, are always to be said.

### 3. ATTENTION IN VOCAL PRAYERS

We must not confine ourselves to reciting the words with our lips; it is necessary that we should raise to God our mind by attention, our heart by devotion, and our will by submission. "If anyone," says St. Thomas, "is voluntarily distracted, it is a sin, and that hinders the fruit of the prayer."<sup>15</sup> We must herein be all the more watchful over ourselves, because habit easily begets routine. It is not, however, of obligation—in fact it is morally impossible—that the attention of the mind be always actual. "It is sufficient," says M. Ribet, "that the will perseveres, and the will to pray is suspended only by a distraction freely consented to."<sup>16</sup>

Nay, more, according to St. Thomas, in order that vocal prayer be meritorious and obtain its effect, it is not necessary that the attention remains actual to the end; it suffices to have begun with an attention which is not afterward retracted by any voluntary distraction. But prayer so made does not nourish the soul with the sap of devotion. Some bring forward as an objection to this the words of St. Gregory: "God listens not to him who while praying listens not to himself."<sup>17</sup> St. Thomas teaches that this holds good only when prayer is begun and

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14. *Devout Life*, 2.1.8.

15. *Summa*, 2.2.83.12.

16. M. Ribet, *Ascét. Chrét.*, 25.7.

17. St. Greg., 22, *Moral.*, 13.