

The Four Kinds of Prayer

The teachings of St. John Cassian

***** A QUESTION ABOUT WHY IT IS MORE DIFFICULT TO MAINTAIN GOOD THOUGHTS THAN TO PRODUCE THEM *****

VII.1 GERMANUS: "If only we were able to enjoy uninterruptedly these spiritual thoughts in the same way and with the same ease that we usually conceive their beginnings. For when they have been conceived in our heart through the recollection of Scripture or through recalling some spiritual deeds or, even more, through a glimpse of the heavenly mysteries, they immediately vanish, having as it were imperceptibly taken flight.

2. "And when our mind finds further occasions for spiritual thoughts, others creep back in and those that had been laid hold of slip rapidly away. Thus the mind has no constancy of its own, nor does it possess of its own power any immutability with regard to holy thoughts even when it seems somehow or other to hold on to them, and it can be believed that it has conceived them by chance and not by its own effort. For how can anyone think that their origin is to be ascribed to our own doing when persevering in them is beyond us?

3. "But let us not, while pursuing this issue, digress any further from the discourse that we began and put off any longer the proposed explanation regarding the nature of prayer. We shall keep this other matter for its own time. Right now we want to be informed about the character of prayer, especially since the Apostle tells us never to cease from it when he says: 'Pray without ceasing.'

4. "Therefore we want to learn about its character first -- that is, about what sort of prayer should always be said -- and then about how we can possess this very thing, whatever it is, and practice it without ceasing. For daily experience and the words of your holiness, according to which you declared that the end of the monk and the summit of all perfection consisted in perfect prayer, demonstrate that this can be achieved with no small effort of the heart."

***** THE REPLY, ON THE DIFFERENT CHARACTERISTICS OF PRAYER *****

VIII.1 ISAAC: "I do not think that all the different kinds of prayer can be grasped without great purity of heart and soul and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. For as many characteristics can be produced as there are conditions in one soul and, indeed, in all souls.

2. "Therefore, although we know that we cannot ascertain all the different kinds of prayer because of our dullness of heart, nonetheless we shall try to analyze them somehow to the extent that our limited experience permits us to do so. According to the degree of purity to which each mind has attained, and according to the nature of the condition either to which it has declined because of what has happened to it or to which it has renewed itself by its own efforts,

these change at every moment. Therefore it is absolutely certain that no one's prayers can be uniform.

3. "For a person prays one way when he is happy and another way when he is burdened by a weight of sadness or despair; one way when he is enjoying spiritual successes and another way when he is oppressed by numerous attacks; one way when he is begging pardon for sins and another way when he is asking for grace or some virtue or, of course, for the annihilation of some vice; one way when he is struck with compunction by reflecting on Gehenna and by fear of future judgment and another way when he is inflamed by the hope and desire for future goods; one way when he is needy and in danger and another way he is safe and at peace; one way when he is enlightened by revelations of heavenly mysteries and another way when he is fettered by sterility of virtue and dryness of thought.

***** THE FOUR KINDS OF PRAYER *****

IX.1 "Therefore once these aspects of the character of prayer have been analyzed -- although not as much as the breadth of the material demands but as much as a brief space of time permits and our feeble intelligence and dull heart can grasp hold of -- there remains to us a still greater difficulty: We must explain one by one the different kinds of prayer that the Apostle [note: "the Apostle," when used by the Desert Fathers, refers to St. Paul] divided in fourfold fashion when he said: 'I urge first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made.' There is not the least doubt that the Apostle established these distinctions in this way for a good reason.

2. "First we must find out what is meant by supplication, what is meant by prayer, what is meant by intercession, and what is meant by thanksgiving. Then we must investigate whether these four kinds are to be used simultaneously by the person praying - - that is whether they should all be joined together in a single act of prayer -- or whether they should be offered one after the other and individually, so that, for example, at one time supplications should be made, at another prayers, at another intercessions or thanksgivings; and whether one person should offer God supplications, another prayers, another intercessions, and another thanksgivings, depending on the maturity to which each mind is progressing according to the intensity of its effort.

***** THE ORDER OF THESE KINDS WITH RESPECT TO THE CHARACTER OF PRAYER *****

X.1 "First, therefore, the very properties of the names and words should be dealt with and the difference between prayer, supplication, and intercession analyzed. Then, in similar fashion, an investigation must be made as to whether they are to be offered separately or together. Third, we must look into whether the very order that was laid down on the authority of the Apostle has deeper implications for the hearer or whether these distinctions should simply be accepted and be considered to have been drawn up by him in an inconsequential manner.

2. "This last suggestion seems quite absurd to me. For it ought not to be believed that the Holy Spirit would have said something through the Apostle in passing and for no reason. And therefore let us treat of them again individually in the same order in which we began, as the Lord permits."

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***** ON SUPPLICATION *****

XI. "'I urge first of all that supplications be made.' A supplication is an imploring or a petition concerning sins, by which a person who has been struck by compunction begs for pardon for his present or past misdeeds.

***** ON PRAYER *****

XII.1. "Prayers are those acts by which we offer or vow something to God . . . that is, a vow. . . . According to the nature of the word this can be expressed as follows: I will make my prayers to the Lord. And what we read in Ecclesiastes: 'If you vow a vow to God, do not delay to pay it,' is

written similarly in Greek: . . . that is, "If you make a prayer to the Lord, do not delay to pay it. [NOTE: the missing phrases refer to Greek words and phrases that cannot be typed here]

2. "This will be fulfilled by each one of us in this way. We pray when we renounce this world and pledge that, dead to every earthly deed and to an earthly way of life, we will serve the Lord with utter earnestness of heart. We pray when we promise that, disdaining worldly honor and spurning earthly riches, we will cling to the Lord in complete contrition of heart and poverty of spirit. We pray when we promise that we will always keep the most pure chastity of body and unwavering patience, and when we vow that we will utterly eliminate from our heart the roots of death dealing anger and sadness. When we have been weakened by sloth and are returning to our former vices and are not doing these things, we shall bear guilt for our prayers and vows and it will be said of us: 'It is better not to vow than to vow and not to pay.' According to the Greed this can be said: It is better for you not to pray than to pray and not to pay.

***** ON INTERCESSION *****

XIII. "In the third place there are intercessions, which we are also accustomed to make for others when our spirits are fervent, beseeching on behalf of our dear ones and for the peace of the whole world, praying (as I would say in the words of the Apostle himself) 'for kings and for all who are in authority.'

***** ON THANKSGIVING *****

XIV. "Finally, in the fourth place there are thanksgivings, which the mind, whether recalling God's past benefits, contemplating his present ones, or foreseeing what great things God has prepared for those who love him, offers to the Lord in unspeakable ecstasies. And with this intensity, too, more copious prayers are sometimes made, when our spirit gazes with most pure eyes upon the rewards of the holy ones that are stored up for the future and is moved to pour out wordless thanks to God with a boundless joy.

***** WHETHER THE FOUR KINDS OF PRAYER ARE NECESSARY FOR EVERYONE ALL AT ONCE OR INDIVIDUALLY AND BY TURNS *****

XV.1. "These four kinds sometimes offer opportunities for richer prayers, for from the class of supplication which is born of compunction for sin, and from the state of prayer which flows from faithfulness in our offerings and the keeping of our vows because of a pure conscience, and from intercession which proceeds from fervent charity, and from thanksgiving which is begotten from considering God's benefits and His greatness and lovingkindness, we know that frequently very fervent and fiery prayers arise. This it is clear that all these kinds which we have spoken about appear helpful and necessary to everyone, so that in one and the same man a changing disposition will send forth pure and fervent prayers of supplication at one time, prayer at another, and intercession at another.

"Nonetheless the first kind seems to pertain more especially to beginners who are still being harassed by the stings and by the memory of their vices; the second to those who already occupy a certain elevated position of mind with regard to spiritual progress and virtuous disposition; the third to those who, fulfilling their vows completely by their deeds, are moved to intercede for others also in consideration of their frailty and out of zeal for charity; the fourth to

those who, having already torn from their hearts the penal thorn of conscience, now, free from care, consider with a most pure mind the kindnesses and mercies of the Lord that he has bestowed in the past, gives in the present, and prepares for the future, and are rapt by their fervent heart to that fiery prayer which can be neither seized nor expressed by the mouth of man.

2. "Yet sometimes the mind which advances to that true disposition of purity and has already begun to be rooted in it, conceiving all of these at one and the same time and rushing through them all like a kind of ungraspable and devouring flame, pours out to God wordless prayers of the purest vigor. These the Spirit itself makes to God as it intervenes with unutterable groans, unbeknownst to us, conceiving at that moment and pouring forth in wordless prayer such great things that they are not only -- I would say -- cannot pass through the mouth but are unable even to be remembered by the mind later on.

3. "Hence, in whatever state a person is, he sometimes finds himself making pure and intense prayers. For even from that first and lowest sort, which has to do with recalling the future judgment, the one who is still subject to the punishment of terror and the fear of judgment is occasionally so struck with compunction that he is filled with no less joy of spirit from the richness of his supplication than the one who, examining the kindnesses of God and going over them in the purity of his heart, dissolves into unspeakable gladness and delight. For, according to the words of the Lord, the one who realizes that more has been forgiven him begins to love more.

***** TO WHAT KINDS OF PRAYER WE OUGHT TO DIRECT OURSELVES *****

XVI. "Yet, as we advance in life and grow perfect in virtue, we should by preference pursue the kinds of prayer that are poured out as a result of contemplating future goods or from an ardent charity, or at least -- to speak in lowly fashion and in conformity with a beginner's standard -- that are produced for the sake of acquiring some virtue or destroying some vice. For we shall be utterly unable to attain to the more sublime types of prayer about which we have spoken if our mind has not been slowly and gradually brought forward through the series of those intercessions."

from St. John Cassian (trans. Boniface Ramsey, O.P.), "The Conferences," (New York: Newman Press, 1997), pp. 334 - 339