

The Struggle in Prayer

O Holy Spirit, Eternal King
and Giver of life incorruptible:
Look down in Thine infinite mercy
on the infirmities of our nature.
Illumine and hallow us.
Let the light of Thy knowledge
shine forth in our darkened hearts.
And in the earthen vessels of our nature
manifest Thine invincible strength.



Prayer is infinite creation, the supreme art. Over and over again we experience an eager upsurge towards God, followed only by a falling away from His light. Time and again we are conscious of the mind's inability to rise to Him. There are moments when we feel ourselves on the verge of insanity. 'Thou didst give me Thy precept to love but there is no strength in me for love. Come and perform in me all that Thou hast commanded, for Thy commandment overtaxes my powers. My mind is too frail to comprehend Thee. My spirit cannot see into the mysteries of Thy will. My days pass in endless conflict. I am tortured by the fear of losing Thee because of the evil thoughts in my heart.'

Sometimes prayer seems to flag and we cry, 'Make haste unto me, O God' (Ps. 70.5). But if we do not let go of the hem of His garment, help will come. It is vital to dwell in prayer in order to counteract the persistently destructive influence of the outside world.

Prayer cannot fail to revive in us the divine breath which God breathed into Adam's nostrils and by virtue of which Adam 'became a living soul' (Gen. 2.7). Then our regenerated spirit will marvel at the sublime mystery of being, and our hearts echo the Psalmist's praise of the wonderful works of the Lord. We shall apprehend the meaning of Christ's words, 'I am come that (men) might have life and that they might have it more abundantly' (John 10.10).

But this life is full of paradox, like all the Gospel teaching. 'I am come to send fire on earth; and what will I, if it be already kindled? (Luke 12.49). Unless we go through this fire that consumes the decaying passions of nature, we shall not see the fire transformed into light, for it is not Light that comes first, then Fire: in our fallen state burning precedes enlightenment. Let us, therefore, bless God for this consuming fire. We do not know altogether but we do at least know 'in part' (1 Cor. 13.9) that there is no other way for us mortals to become 'children of the resurrection' (Luke 20.36), to reign together with Christ. However painful this re-creating may be; however it may distress and lacerate- the process, agonising as it is, will be a blessed one. Erudition requires long labour but prayer is incalculably harder to acquire.

When the Gospels and Epistles become real for us we see how naïve were our past notions of God and life in Him, so far does Reality surpass man's imagining. 'Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him' (1 Cor. 2.9). Even a whisper of the Divine is glory beyond compare to all the content of life lived apart from God.

Strait is the way, and thorny and sorrowful. We shall heave many a sigh as we go along. The peculiar fear which is 'the beginning of wisdom' (Ps. 111.10) will clutch at our heart and twist our whole being outside in to concentrate attention on what is happening within. Impotent to follow Christ, we stop short in dread. 'Jesus went before (the disciples); they were amazed; and as they followed, they were afraid' (Mark 10.32).

None of us can escape suffering if we would be born into a new life in God- if we would transform our natural body into a spiritual body. (As St Paul said,

'It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body' (1 Cor. 15.44).). Only the power of prayer overcomes the resistance of matter and releases our spirit from this cramped, inert world into the vast open spaces radiant with Light.

The mind is bewildered by the trials that befall in our struggle for prayer. It is not easy to identify their cause or their kind. Until we go 'into the sanctuary of God' (Ps. 73.17) we shall often hesitate, unsure whether our works are pleasing to the All-Holy. Since we are not exempt from sin we can only think that it is our wrong-doing which provokes the storms raging around us- though St Peter reminded the early Christians in their despair that 'the spirit of glory' (1 Pet. 4.14) rested upon them. One thing, however, is not open to doubt: the hour will come when all our trials and tribulations will disappear into the past. Then we shall see that the most painful periods of our life were the most fruitful and will accompany us beyond the confines of this world, to be the foundation of the Kingdom 'which cannot be moved' (Heb. 12.28).

The omnipotent God summoned us from the void. By nature we are of the void; yet even from God we expect consideration and regard. Suddenly the Almighty reveals Himself in boundless humility. The vision floods our entire being and instinctively we bow in adoration. Even this does not seem enough but however much we try to humble ourselves before Him we still fall short of His humility.

Prayer to this God of love and humility rises from the depths of our being. When our heart is filled with love for God we are wholly aware of our closeness to Him- although we know full well that we are but dust (cf. Gen. 3.19). Howbeit, in the visible form of our nature the immortal God described the likeness of His invisible Being, and thus we apprehend eternity. Through prayer we enter into Divine life; and God praying in us is uncreated life permeating us.

In making us in His image, after His likeness, God placed us before Him, not as action of His, entirely subject to Him, but as fact (datum) even for Him- as free beings And by virtue of this, relations between man and God are based on the principle of freedom. When we take advantage of this freedom and commit sin, we thrust God aside. This liberty to turn away from God is the negative, tragic aspect of free will but it is a sine qua non if we are to take hold of the life which is truly divine, life which is not predetermined.

We have the diametrically opposite alternatives: either to refuse God- the very essence of sin- or to become sons of God. Because we are made in the

likeness of God we naturally desire the divine perfection which is in our Father. And when we follow Him we are not submitting to the dictates of some extraneous power: we are merely obeying our own impulse to assimilate His perfection. 'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect' (Matt. 5.48).

Our Father which art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy Name
Thou hast given me to perceive Thy holiness, and I would fain be holy in Thee.

Thy Kingdom come
May Thy glorious life enter into me and become mine.

Thy will be done
in the earth of my created being, as it is in heaven, in Thee Thyself, from all eternity.

Give us this day our daily bread
'the true bread which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world' (John 6.32-33).

And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive them that trespass against us
By Thy Holy Spirit grant me so to forgive others that nothing may prevent me from receiving Thy forgiveness.

Lead us not into temptation
Thou knowest my perverseness; that I am ever ready to transgress. Send Thine angel to stand in the way for an adversary against me when I would sin (cf. Num. 22.22).

But deliver us from evil
Deliver me from the power of the mortal enemy, the adversary of man and God.

At first we pray for ourselves; but when God by the Holy Spirit gives us understanding our prayer assumes cosmic proportions. Then, when we pray 'Our Father' we think of all mankind, and solicit fulness of grace for all as for ourselves. Hallowed be Thy Name among all peoples. Thy Kingdom come for all peoples that Thy Divine life may become their life. Thy will be done: Thy will alone unites all in love of Thee. Deliver us from evil- from the 'murderer' (John 8.44) who, far and wide, sows enmity and death.

(According to our Christian interpretation evil- like good- exists only where there is personal form of being. Without this personal form there would be no evil- only determined natural processes.)

The problem of evil in the world generally and in mankind particularly poses the question of God's participation in the historical life of the human race. Many lose their faith because it seems that, if God existed, evil could not be so rampant and there could not be such widespread senseless suffering. They forget that God cares for man's freedom, which is the root principle of his creation in the Divine image. For the Creator to interfere when man inclines to evil would be tantamount to depriving him of the possibility of self-determination, and would destroy him altogether. But God can and does save individuals and nations if they tread the road He designates.

Christ said, 'I came not to send peace, but a sword' (Matt. 10.34) and 'division' (Luke 12.51). Christ summoned us to war on the plane of the spirit, and our weapon is 'the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God' (Eph. 6.17). Our battle is waged in extraordinarily unequal conditions. We are tied hand and foot. We dare not strike with fire or sword: our sole armament is love, even for enemies. This unique war in which we are engaged is indeed a holy war. We wrestle with the last and only enemy of mankind- death (1 Cor. 15.26). Our fight is the fight for universal resurrection.

The Lord justified and sanctified the line of His forefathers. Likewise, every one of us, if we follow Christ, can justify ourselves in our individual being, having restored the Divine image in us through total repentance, and by so doing can help to justify our own forefathers. We bear in ourselves the legacy of the sins of our ancestors; and, by virtue of the ontological unity of the human race, healing for us means healing for them, too. We are so interjoined that man does not save himself alone.

I found that the monks of the Holy Mountain understood this well. A monk is a man who has dedicated his life to God; who believes that if we want God to be wholly with us and in us, then we must give ourselves to Him completely, not partly. The monk renounces marriage and the fathering of children in order to observe and keep Christ's commandments as fully as possible. If a monk does not achieve his true purpose- to live his life on earth in the spirit enjoined by Christ- his monasticism has not been duly implemented. In other words, he neither assists in the continuation of the human race by procreating children, nor does he entirely further immortality through resurrection. He drops out of the historical plan by his refusal to take positive historical- not to say, political- action, yet he does not transfer

existence to the spiritual, meta-historical plane. Having gained no victory on the universal plane of spiritual warfare, he is not helping his fellow-humans to attain the divine plane. However, though the monk may not realise Christian perfection, his striving, even so, helps the whole world.

O Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit,
The only Truth and God;
Ever-living and all-powerful,
Who alone dost give strength to the troubled
and upholdest the weak;
O Thou without Whom the strong shall weary
and the firm grow feeble,
those who are full shall hunger
and young men shall bend:
Hear us in our affliction
and raise us to worthy service of Thee.
We beseech Thee, be swift to hear and have mercy.

When by the grace of the Holy Spirit it is given to a man to 'come...unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ' (Eph. 4.13), such an event reflects in the most decided fashion not only on the destiny of all mankind- its influence reaches beyond the confines of history and reflects on the whole of cosmic life, for the world itself was created for man.

When we turn away from the path indicated by Christ- that is, from the deification of man by the power of the Holy Spirit- the whole point of man's coming into the world disappears.

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