Praying with Saints and Sinners

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Preface by Pope Francis

NOTES ON PRAYER
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To my brother, Myles

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Introduction

The saints whose writings on prayer and meditation are explored in this book are among the most celebrated in the great spiritual tradition. They know, in depth, of the light and fire of which they speak. Page after page of their writings attain to levels of vision and understanding which are remarkable. The principal focus of the present work is not, however, on the higher states and stages of contemplative prayer. The aim is something far more modest – namely, to discover what help the great saints can offer those of us who desire to make progress in the life of prayer, but who find ourselves being constantly deflected from our purpose, our tentative efforts undermined perhaps most of all by human weakness.

One of the things we discover in the stories of the Christian saints, and it's a striking paradox, is that they learn how to pray, at least in part, from the witness of a certain number of celebrated sinners. Thus in the Second Way of Prayer in the Nine Ways of Prayer of St Dominic, for example, we witness the saint humbly repeating

the publican's prayer from St Luke's Gospel: "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" (*Luke* 18:13).[1] Likewise, St Teresa of Ávila, speaking of those who attain to the highest mansion of all in *The Interior Castle*, notes that they never lose contact with the humble spirit of the publican. Overwhelmed by the radiance and majesty of God and by the thought of their own human weakness, they sometimes "go about, like the publican, without daring to lift up their eyes".[2]

It was the publican, we are informed in St Luke's Gospel, not the Pharisee, who went home acquitted of his sins (see 18:13-14). Are we to take it, then, that when he walked away, he was completely unaware of the success of his prayer? On this question, with wry good humour, the Dominican Vincent McNabb, remarks:

> The publican did not know he was justified. If you had asked him, "Can you pray?" he would have said, "No, I cannot pray. I was thinking of asking the Pharisee. He seems to know all about it. I could only say I was a sinner. My past is so dreadful. I cannot imagine myself praying. I am better at stealing".[3]

In the New Testament, no sinner's prayer made a greater impact than the bold appeal of the Good Thief on the Hill of Calvary: "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (*Luke* 23:42). The reply Jesus gave was so swift, so unexpected, it must have pierced the man through with a wild, wondrous hope: "Today you

will be with me in paradise" (v. 43). Elsewhere, in the tradition, we can find prayers similar to the stark appeal made here by the Good Thief, prayers born out of need and desperation but which, unknown to those who make them – the sinners and "thieves" of this world – capture and steal the heart of Christ Jesus.

Of all the examples I've come upon over the years of sinners at prayer, by far the most striking is a prayer composed by an anonymous monk of the early Church. It's a humble prayer, a naked prayer, a prayer one can certainly describe as desperation, but it's a prayer that is, at the same time, full of hope in God's mercy. And it's so candid, so bold, so touchingly honest, it always makes me smile when I read it. The stark, urgent appeal of the prayer is as sharp and alive now as it was centuries ago, when first composed.

> Lord, whether I want it or not, save me, because dust and ashes that I am, I love sin. But you are God almighty, so stop me yourself. If you have pity on the just, that's not much, or if you save the pure, because they are worthy of your mercy. Show the full splendour of your mercy in me. Reveal in me your love for men and women, because this poor man has no other refuge but you.[4]

The four chapters of this small book focus on the work of four saints, two men and two women. Here, in the order in which the work is addressed, are the names and dates

of the four saints: Augustine of Hippo, 354-430; Teresa of Ávila, 1515-82; Thomas Aquinas, 1225-74; Thérèse of Lisieux, 1873-1897. All four are highly revered within the tradition, all of them are named and acknowledged as Doctors of the Church. Their writings are remarkable for the revelation they contain of an achieved divine intimacy and friendship with God. But no less remarkable is the striking humility and poverty of spirit with which these saints turn spontaneously to God for help. Often, we find them at prayer raising their voices with the urgency of desire and the humble, illumined hope of sinners like the Good Thief and the publican.

The saints, it soon becomes clear, are human beings like us. That's why they can offer people still struggling with weakness such great compassion and encouragement. However, the remarkable sanctity of their lives remains a stark, unignorable challenge to our mediocrity. In their daring, prayerful, dedicated surrender to God, they have allowed their lives to be transformed by grace, and allowed the radiance, strength, power, and beauty of Christ to shine through their human weakness.