

The Church in Prayer

Carthusian Monks

Preface by Pope Francis

NOTES ON PRAYER

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The Mystery and Gift of Prayer

“Christ Jesus, high priest of the new and eternal covenant, taking human nature, introduced into this earthly exile that hymn which is sung throughout all ages in the halls of heaven. He joins the entire community of mankind to Himself, associating it with His own singing of this canticle of divine praise. For He continues His priestly work through the agency of His Church, which is ceaselessly engaged in praising the Lord and interceding for the salvation of the whole world.”

These words of the Council (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 83), which St Paul VI cited in his promulgation of the revised Liturgy of the Hours, describe, in a wonderful synthesis, the gift and mystery of the prayer of the Church, and of every faithful Christian.

The mystery of prayer

Already this text of the Council can give us a glimpse that prayer is a mystery because it has its origin and its roots in the very Heart of God, in the “hymn which is

sung throughout all ages in the halls of heaven,” which resounds eternally in the very Mystery of God, and which He alone, the Triune God, knows. For this reason He alone can sing it and teach it to us.

It is in Christ’s Paschal mystery that the Father has opened “the doors of eternity” to us and revealed the mystery of His intimate life, has revealed what is this “eternal song of praise.” As far as our poverty is given to understand what has been revealed to us, there, in the “silence of the eternal ages” that surrounds the mystery of God (cf. *Rom 16:25*), one Word alone resounds, that of the Father who says to the Son, “You are my Son” (*Ps 2:7*). This is the sole Word that the Father eternally speaks, and uttering this Word “exhausts” all the Father’s activity. The Father does not and cannot do anything other than “speak” His sole Word, His Only-begotten Word: “The Father spoke one Word, which was His Son, and *speaks it always* in eternal silence,” as St John of the Cross stupendously puts it.

And the Son, in turn, responds to Him with a single word: “Abba-Father.”

The Spirit is the Silence that allows the Father to utter the Word “You are my Son” (cf. St Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Christians of Magnesia*, VIII, 2) and allows the Son to listen to it and therefore to recognise Himself as such, as Son of the Father, responding, “Father-Abba.”

In turn, the Son is the silence in which the Father can “speak Himself forth completely” (St Cyril of Alexandria,

Commentary on 2nd Cor., PG 74, 923-924) and without reservation. The Verbum, the eternal Word, is the “Amen” (*Rev* 3:14), the perfect “Yes” (cf. *2 Cor* 1:19), the welcome without limit of the Father’s Word: “You are my Son.” If He were to speak His own words, He could not fully welcome the word of the Father, He could not be *the Word of the Father*: “The word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me” (*John* 14:24).

The Word has no Words of His own. He is only the Word of the Father because He can speak only what He has heard: “I declare to the world what I have heard from him.... I do nothing on my own authority but speak just as the Father taught me...the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me” (*John* 8:26, 28; 14:24).

The Son, the Word uttered, of His own possesses only pure silence, He is pure silence, because He stands before the Father like a silent echo that reflects in a perfectly pure way what the Father says to Him: “You are my Son.” He stands before the Father as a silent and serene mirror, most pure (*Wis* 7:26), which perfectly reflects what the Father is, what the Father does. “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise” (*John* 5:19). This dialogue between the Father and the Son in the Spirit, this eternal “self-speaking,” constitutes the whole life of God, everything that exists “in the beginning.”

“Abba-Father” is therefore “the song of praise that resounds eternally in the halls of heaven.” It is “the hymn of thanksgiving that rises to the Father from his ever-living Christ” (Liturgy).

For this reason, “Abba, Father!” is the only and the true prayer that perfectly glorifies the Father. And the gift that Christ has given to His Church is the possibility of being able to sing it with Him, through Him and in Him.

Already from these succinct reflections we can glimpse that the prayer that Christ has left as a legacy to His Church, which safeguards it incessantly, is His Mystery as Son, it is He Himself... In giving us His Son, the Father has given us the very mystery of prayer, of the possibility of praying, that is, of entering into real communion with Him, with the God whom no one has ever seen nor can see, but whom we can now, in Christ, moved by the Holy Spirit, in all truth call “Abba!”...

Our prayer and that of the Church is therefore “union with the prayer of Christ insofar as it makes us participate in his mystery” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2718). But when we meditate on and discuss the prayer of the Church, we are talking about our own prayer, because the boundary between the Church and the individual Christian is permeable and transparent. Talking about the mystery of the Church is equivalent to talking about the mystery of every Christian soul. In fact, “every soul, through the mystery of the sacramental bond, carries fully within itself the whole Church, which is one in all

and entirely in individuals” (St Peter Damian, *Dominus Vobiscum*, PL 145, 235).

The gift of prayer

Prayer is a gift because, with His Incarnation, Christ has given to His Church, and through the Church to every man, this “song of praise,” “Abba-Father,” which He eternally sings to His Father in the halls of heaven.

Christ “introduced [it] into this earthly exile” because His joy is living with men (cf. *Prov* 8:31). Our prayer therefore arises first of all from the longing that God feels for man, from the desire that Christ has to be with us. Not the desire to be adored, praised and served, but simply the desire to “be with us,” to be able to sing with us, almost as if He had “need” of us, of our voice, so that His song to the Father may be complete and perfect.

Christ “introduced into this earthly exile that hymn which is sung throughout all ages in the halls of heaven” in order to offer us the possibility of renewing the dialogue with the true Father, with the Father whom He alone, Jesus, knows (cf. *Matt* 11:27). He knows Him and knows that His joy is living with men (cf. *Prov* 8:31). This affirmation of uncreated Wisdom therefore contains the heart of the mystery of prayer. Prayer, in its deepest core, is nothing other than our welcoming of this desire of God to be with us, to be with each of us personally, to give us Himself, to make us participants in His Life, in His Reality, in His “nature,” as St Peter says (*2 Pet* 1:4).

His joy is in being able to share life with us, to live our life so as to be able to give us His in exchange, to “drink our bitterness and give us the sweetness of His grace,” as St Ambrose said (*Expositio in Psalmum 118*, PL 15, 1463). This desire of God to live with us is the source and wellspring of prayer.

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