

## PRAYER OF PETITION AND AFTER

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**I**SN'T it pleasing to God that my prayer should be just simply 'Thy Will be done'? But our Lord did not only tell us to treat God like a father who will change his mind; he emphasized it by the story of a woman who asked for bread and was refused, and went on asking, and at last, because she went on asking, she got it. Of course God does not change his mind; but there is something in us that corresponds to that. Every time you pray to God for something, you are equivalently asking him to change his mind.

Ask yourselves, would it really be pleasing to a father or mother if their children never asked them for anything? They want to be asked! Otherwise it would seem their children were lacking in affection for them. I expect it is the perpetual burden of mothers' and fathers' lives to be asked again and again. Well! God, your Father, wants to be asked.

It is implied in the name 'Father' that we ought to go on asking. 'Be instant in prayer.' The prayer of petition is not the only kind of vocal prayer. The Church encourages a great deal of praise and adoration, as for example in the *Gloria in Excelsis*.

We shall never make any spiritual advance, or grow in harmony with God, except in proportion as we get to know God. Our Lord told us it was for that purpose we were given our minds. The human mind which deals with universals and abstractions is used on all sorts of objects; but first and foremost it is to be used on God, and it is common-sense that we must know more about God if we are to have closer dealings with him. How am I going to know more about God? I have got to work for it and apply my mind to it. It sounds rather grim, but actually you can't help doing it. That perfectly wonderful instrument, the mind, is to be used first of all in getting to know God. We have got the *duty* of using our minds to get to know him.

Now, thinking, comparing, hearing, reading, applying our intellects—that is meditation. Meditation, strictly

speaking, is not prayer at all, it is simply thinking, even though we are thinking about God. I must introduce the will into it or I might go on speculating for ever without getting any nearer to God. St James said, 'The devils believe and tremble'; they get no good out of believing, they advance no nearer to God. Merely working out is nothing without the heart. So we come across that prayer we call Mental Prayer. Mental Prayer is praying with the mind with the help of the will. It means thinking about God in order that I may know more about God and find the means of getting closer and closer to him.

This prayer has almost as many forms as people who practise it. It will bear much analysis, and it is the application of the intellect to something whence information about God may be drawn: the Gospel particularly. The Gospel is the life of our life. It is upon that that the whole of our faith is built. It is the inexhaustible source. But it is not there to pick up like a piece of paper; you have got to masticate it and digest it. And that is done with your mind. 'Why did he say that? to what sort of persons? for what reason? in what kind of circumstances?' Every word our Lord said was as if he had his eyes on me and nobody else. I invoke the Holy Ghost! I turn my will on; I want to know what he is saying there. I want to know what God means me to get from it. I make acts: 'Give me grace; give me light, to know what you mean, what you want of me.' That will be the skeleton of my prayer, and it has to have flesh. Memory and imagination can influence my sensitive will.

Eventually I come to a point when I don't want any more intellectual knowledge about God. My own capacity, though it might be only a thimbleful—my capacity is full. I feel no further urge to know any more about God, but I do feel, now, an urge to know God. I don't want to have any more information *about* him: I want *him*. It is like the desire of the moth for the flame. So that often when I try to think about God, I cannot. This does not necessarily refer to someone who is very far advanced; that would be the devil's temptation to make us think it is out of our reach. He puts us off attempting things that are well within our power.

Be bold! If you dare nothing you'll do nothing. You don't need to be a great saint to want this something immeasurably bigger. There is a darkness over everything. I cannot get any nearer to God. All I have is a great desire to get nearer. My sensitive will does not work; so that I feel as if I did not even want God. My imagination will not figure God to me, my mind won't make anything out of the strange figures it produces. I feel I have lost all taste for God, but what really happens is that I have lost all taste for the substitute for God. Then follow the advice of the Psalmist: 'Be still and know that I am thy God.' No imagination is necessary, no activity. It is quite simple; what happens really is this: I have lost my ability to get hold of pictures with my imagination; I have lost the appetite for what used to satisfy me. Somehow or other God gives me grace to recognize my powerlessness, and it is in that stillness that God begins to communicate himself. If I have used my faculties to the extent I can, I will be silent. It is as if God said: 'You can never get any further, but there will be movement on my part if there is stillness on yours.'

What happens then? Darkness. All my life I could think about God, imagine God, move towards God, and now I can do nothing; yet my desire is greater than ever. He is giving himself to me, only I do not know it. What way is God giving himself to me? In his own way. That is double-Dutch to me, and until I become resistless under it I am in abject darkness, because my faculties are useless now; they have got to the limit of their powers, and what is happening in my soul is God's method of approach to me; and I do not know anything about God's method any more than a dog knows about the integral calculus. I have to wait to learn it, and the interval is darkness—like some person brought to the front door of a house; inside it is pitch darkness and he is told to go in, and to go on in the darkness, knowing nothing. Then God gives me a slight release, and I am able to make a little act, of praise, ejaculation. But mostly it is a thoughtless, wordless, almost aimless waiting. This does not mean I am never to make vocal prayers or meditation, say Office, Rosary, read a spiritual book. No, it is only in pure prayer that I have got to be silent, wait

for God. I have to be really submissive, in a condition when all faith, hope, and charity seem to be blotted out. But people tell us there is a tiny something left. Something that will not let us go, that is effected within us so that when at the end of our prayer we go about our business, instead of looking back on that half-hour as awfulness, we look back at it with a kind of nostalgia as if something remarkable had happened. What it is we don't know, because we are not sufficiently harmonized with God to know his way of acting. But we have been drawn a little millimetre nearer. No parent would ever increase or allow suffering in a child longer than needful. So neither does God. There will always in this life be something which my own human nature will find difficult, costly, but that Prayer of Quiet is God's first beginning—God letting us have him and not merely knowledge about him. And then, St John of the Cross warns us, at the cost of I don't know what we may go further. But so few people pay the price.

In that Prayer of Quiet there is matter for great thankfulness. For think how you are seeing things—not as you see them but as God sees them. And this is a thing we ought to look for, to expect. No ambition: that punctures it at once. I start wanting only God and he is offering himself to me. It needs tremendous practice in self-abnegation on the part of the lower nature. But it is not as if God bargains with you: 'You do so much penance and I'll give you this union.' Not at all. It is inherent in the nature of things.

Let us concentrate on doing the utmost we can, never thinking 'that is all', but knowing that nothing less than the utmost we can do will suffice; and God will do the rest.

That is the way to our Father—or rather our Father's way to us.