

Liturgy and spiritual life: "Lord, teach us to pray"¹

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The request that Jesus' disciples make to him, "Lord, teach us to pray," affirms and confirms that we need God's help to pray properly and that, without his help, our prayers would not glorify him as he deserves to be glorified. Christ responded to this request by giving us the *Our Father*. But the Church, his holy bride—and our loving mother—also heard this call and gave us the liturgy. Its most glorious fruit is the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, but the liturgy also includes the canonical hours.

This sublime subject is the focus of this article. The primary purpose of human existence is to worship God in spirit and in truth. At the heart of the liturgy is the desire to give God the worship He deserves because He is God. This is why, in his holy rule, St. Benedict tells his monks that they should prefer nothing to *the opus Dei*.

The Church radically departs from Aristotle's eudemonism, for whom happiness was the supreme good. According to Church teaching, man's primary goal is the glorification of God, and his happiness is only his secondary goal. This is why it prays as follows: *Infunde cordibus nostris tui amoris affectum: ut te in omnibus et super omnia diligentes, promissiones tuas, quae omne desiderium superant consequamur* – "Pour into our hearts the fervour of Your love, so that by loving You in all things and above all things, we may obtain the goods You have promised us, which surpass all we can desire" (5th Sunday after Pentecost). To pursue the first end in order to attain the second would be to completely reverse the hierarchy of values, and this would in fact be contrary to the goal pursued: indeed, we can only attain bliss if we love God for himself and not as a means to attain happiness. We can only attain bliss if we worship God, for he alone is Holy, he alone is Lord, he alone is the Most High. Worship is due to him; it can never be a means of attaining bliss.

Communists often criticise Christians for serving God only because they expect happiness in return, but this criticism is totally unfounded. Having a radically false idea of the essence of bliss, they wrongly claim that Christians seek only their own selfish interests and that this is why their behaviour is 'mercenary'. As for themselves, they claim that their concern for 'humanity' is selfless because they themselves will never know the 'workers' paradise' that they are working so hard to

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establish. It should be emphasised, , that for Christians, happiness is not the ultimate goal; the ultimate goal is God. And our happiness flows from our love for God. Our joy is to praise and glorify him. Our happiness is not outside of him, it is in him. It is in St Paul that we find the most paradoxical formulation of this fundamental truth: he declares himself ready to renounce his happiness for the love of his Jewish brothers, so that they may recognise that Christ is the king of the Jews. Of course, Saint Paul's paradoxical wish—which expresses the holy folly of his love for them—is impossible because he could only lose his happiness by sinning and thus cutting himself off from the one he loves. What he wants to tell us is that, because of the intensity of his love for God and for his brothers, he would be willing, if it were possible, to sacrifice the good that his sacrifice could bring him – if only his brothers would give the response that is due to his infinite holiness.

It is surprising to note how often the importance of the liturgy in Catholic life is neglected, as evidenced, in particular, by the deplorable habit of reciting the rosary during Holy Mass: this proves how even pious people do not understand that the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the most perfect liturgical act. In our prayer life, there must be a hierarchy: as praiseworthy as reciting the rosary may be, it should not take precedence over the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, for this is the greatest gift that Christ gave us at the Last Supper.

I was fortunate to receive a truly Catholic education. In primary and secondary school, devoted nuns, the Canons of St. Augustine, gave us six hours of religious instruction per week, so I really knew my religion when I left school. But it was only when I arrived in the United States and met Dietrich von Hildebrand by attending the liturgical evenings he organised in his modest flat – he was a refugee – that I discovered the incomparable treasures of the Tridentine liturgy. For me, this was a priceless discovery because it established a deep connection between my knowledge of the faith and the way I lived it on a daily basis. Indeed, the liturgy is not only the most perfect glorification of God: it also contains the spiritual nourishment we need to connect the mysteries of the faith with our daily lives. This is why Dom Guéranger's *liturgical year* remains one of the greatest treasures of the spiritual life.

The liturgy is the most perfect prayer because it is the prayer of Christ himself, the Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, the Saviour of the world. Now, his prayer is the prayer of his holy spouse, the Holy Catholic Church, and all the faithful are invited to join in the praise, which she offers to her divine spouse. In the liturgy, the Church militant joins with the Church triumphant to sing the glory of God: *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus*.

She also joins with those in purgatory who await the happy moment when they will be united with God. In this sense, the liturgy makes us clearly aware that the whole mystical body is present in liturgical praise. The imperfection of man—always 'groaning and weeping in this valley of tears'—is compensated for by the glorious choir of all those who still live on this earth and those who no longer live here—that is, those who can no longer die—united in the same faith and love to worship the dispenser of all good things.

However imperfect and inadequate human prayer may be, it is complemented by the song of love that comes from the mouths of the saints. In the liturgy, we discover what true communion means and how radically different it is from the superficial "being together" of a mundane reception, where people are together without being in communion; in this regard, it has been aptly described as a "lonely crowd". In the liturgy, we are not isolated. We can benefit from the treasures accumulated by those who are our models: the saints. Loving God, they learned to love their neighbour authentically – something that is impossible on a purely natural level – and to share generously with us the merits acquired through their prayers and sufferings. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux promised that she would spend her heaven doing good on earth. The liturgy contains all these treasures and never refuses to give them to those who, aware of their neediness and poverty, humbly ask for them: *Pauper et inops sum ego*. The liturgy constantly reminds us that we are but dust and ashes, weak creatures, always on the threshold of death.

Yet this lesson in humility is accompanied by a radiant hope: indeed, through the merits of our Saviour, we too can be healed and join with our brothers and sisters in whom Christ lives. Man always needs something; he is a beggar. Yet when they beg, beggars must always respect the hierarchy of values. This is expressed remarkably well in the liturgy: *Fac eos quae tibi sunt placata postulare* (6th Sunday after Pentecost). We must ask God to increase our faith, hope and charity: *Omnipotens sempiternus Deus, da nobis fidei, spei et caritatis augmentum: et, ut mereamur assequi quod promittis, fac nos amare quod praecipis* (13th Sunday after Pentecost).

We must therefore, in our life of prayer, give absolute priority to the adoration and glorification of God, as the saints have shown us by their example, who, in their moments of great distress and intense suffering, never forgot that absolute priority must be given to the glorification of God. Shortly before his death, St Francis of Assisi composed his hymn to the sun – a hymn of thanksgiving – to teach us that even during trials, God must remain at the heart of our prayer life. When we face a storm, we can always pray thus: "May the hail, the snow and the storm praise the Lord."

While it is true that we must pray first and foremost for the grace to love God above all else and our neighbour as ourselves, this does not prevent us from asking for other things, even if everything must be subordinated to these primary requirements. We must pray not only to worship God, but also to glorify Him, to thank Him for His gifts and to ask His forgiveness, that is, to ask Him to grant us the "gift of tears": *Educ de cordibus nostris duritia lacrymas compunctionis; ut peccata nostra plangere valeamus, remissionemque eorum, te miserante mereamur accipere*. Tears that melt our hearts of stone and transform them into human hearts: the holy tears shed by Peter when he realised the gravity of the sin he had committed in denying the one he sincerely loved; the tears shed by Saint Augustine in the garden of Milan when his heart finally succumbed to grace; the tears shed by Saint Francis of Assisi because "Love is not loved".

Liturgy has nothing to do with Gnosticism, which, in one form or another, proudly asserts that we are above bodily needs. Far be it from us to deny the place that prayers of petition occupy in the spiritual life of man. We are asked to pray for our daily bread, but this earthly and perishable bread must not diminish our hunger for the bread of life that we receive in the Holy Eucharist. We ask God to protect us from the countless dangers that threaten us: *A peste, fame et bello, libera nos Domine*. In the liturgy, we humbly acknowledge that we have needs, and we ask God to satisfy them. This humble request is combined with our gratitude for the fact that God, whom we dare to call Father, loves us and that he who cares for the birds will not forget us.

Unfortunately, many of us only turn to God when we are in distress. On 11 September 2001, places of worship were full. It did not last long, but we can be sure that the same scenario will repeat itself as soon as another tragedy strikes us. Modern man suffers from a serious illness: he has lost all sense of the hierarchy of values. This explains the incredible popularity of sport. For many, champions are heroes. How far we have come from the Middle Ages! Heroes then were saints.

The liturgy introduces us to the world of the sacred: the sacred is that which belongs to God or is consecrated to God. It asks us to "aspire to heavenly things and despise earthly things". Not only is the world in which we live "desacralised"—the Blessed Sacrament is relegated to a dark corner of our churches—but we no longer make much distinction between the sacred and the profane. Was it not Teilhard de Chardin who made the unfortunate statement: "Everything is sacred"? We necessarily deduce from this that nothing is sacred. Before the burning bush, Moses took off his shoes. When he came down from Mount Sinai, he veiled his face because he had heard the voice of God. We Catholics have Christ present in the tabernacle; yet many Catholics show little respect for the Blessed Sacrament and often dare to enter the house of God dressed immodestly. A

few months ago, in a parish church in the United States, a man attended Mass in his swimming trunks! Today, our churches resemble party halls where people come to chat and relax. This must seem particularly shocking to Muslims who prostrate themselves during prayer; and yet God is not physically present in their mosques! *Terribilis est locus iste*, prays the Church. Christ drove the merchants out of the temple because their commercial activities defiled a place consecrated to God: "This is a house of prayer, and you have made it a den of thieves. As for us, we have more than the temple in Jerusalem: the Saviour of the world is truly present in the tabernacle. And yet, very often, our attitude is in shocking contradiction with the sacredness of the house of God: *O quam metuendus est locus iste*. This desacralisation is also evident in the fact that we no longer kneel to receive Communion.

In several of his works, Dietrich von Hildebrand emphasised the vital importance of the virtue of reverence. He beautifully defined the nature of the primordial virtue of purity—so trampled upon in our society—and showed that this virtue is a response to the mystery of the sexual realm—cf. *Purity*, Steubenville (Ohio): Franciscan University Press, 1989—. Once we understand that this is not merely a biological need but something greater that is mysteriously associated with spousal love and the possibility of procreation, we will not fail to acquire this virtue. As desirable as self-control and temperance are, they alone are not enough to guarantee purity, which is so fundamental to our relationships with God, ourselves and our neighbour: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

But the importance of this virtue is not limited to this mysterious realm. It is also fundamental in all aspects of human life. Here again, the liturgy teaches us the spirit of reverence: it is a response to the holiness of God, to everything related to God, to everything that has value: beauty and truth. Those who nourish themselves on the liturgy will certainly end up being imbued with its spirit, and will behave with awe and respect towards things that demand such an attitude – cf. Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Fundamental Moral Attitudes*, New York: Longmans and Green, 1950; *Liturgy and Personality*, Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1960.

The liturgy constantly confronts us with the truth: our metaphysical situation, our sinful nature; but also, at the same time, the holy healing granted to those who humbly ask for it: *Munda me*. How far we are from the Lutherans, for whom we can never be purified and who claim that Christ's merits cover all our sins! How can we conceive, that God, who loves us, would be content to cover our nakedness without healing us, his children, so that we might praise him in spirit and in truth?

Often, people concern themselves only with problems for which they themselves are responsible and turn away from the source of all solutions. Many human problems are artificial, and man is the cause. Many people think that liturgy is a conventional form of prayer, too formal to nourish the hungry souls of the faithful. They advocate "private prayers" that come "from the heart": for them, this is the only form of prayer that can bring man closer to God. Yet the Church affirms that the liturgy is the most perfect form of prayer because it has its source in the heart of Christ. It is like a cathedral, the rock on which our prayer life must be founded: while it is true that there is room in this cathedral for statues and paintings of great value, these must still be integrated into the space defined by the sacred walls of the church.

If the liturgy were to completely lose sight of this fundamental truth, human beings, who are weak by nature, would inevitably fall into subjectivism and lose sight of the glorious universality of liturgical praise. In fact, one need only be receptive to the liturgy to be struck by the fact that the spirit of communion among the faithful is inseparably and remarkably associated with individual needs. Indeed, there can be no authentic communion unless the value of the individual is fully recognised. Let us note how the liturgy admirably combines the dimension of "we" – we praise You, we adore You, we glorify You – with the *mea culpa* of the *Confiteor*.

Nowadays, it is fashionable to emphasise the communal dimension of sin. We are told *ad nauseam* that we must ask forgiveness for the sins committed by our brothers in the past: the Crusades, the Inquisition. What is curious is that this tendency is accompanied by another, more threatening one: forgetting to ask forgiveness for our own sins. Today, confessionals are empty. In a way, we behave as if our regret for sins we have not committed advantageously replaces our regret for the sins we commit on a daily basis. Too often, *mea culpa* is replaced by *nostra culpa* – we are all sinners – or, worse still, by *tua culpa* – all my sins are the fault of my parents, the society in which I live and, possibly, my genes! This latter tendency is part of the strategy used by a defendant's lawyers: a crime is justified by the fact that the defendant was mistreated in his youth, that he was deprived of something, etc. We already find this natural human tendency to blame others in Adam and Eve: Eve blames the serpent, Adam blames his wife. In the liturgy, this is not how it works: it constantly reminds each of us of our sinful nature and calls us to , to ask forgiveness from a God who is not only merciful: He is mercy itself. Many of the prayers of the Mass express that man is aware of his own imperfection and that he confidently places his hope for forgiveness in the one who suffered and died for him: *Deus, qui omni potentiam tuam parcendo maxime et miserando manifestas...* (10th Sunday after Pentecost).

Saint Paul calls us to become "new men"; in other words, we must be transformed in Christ so that we can say, with this great apostle: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. Once again, we need only consider the liturgy to learn how this transformation can take place—for we cannot bring it about by our own efforts. The liturgy is, by its very nature, non-pragmatic. Was it not Pascal who wrote that he was not pragmatic because he could do more without being so? The liturgy teaches us that we must never consider the worship of God as a means of our transformation. The liturgy is radically anti-pragmatic and, paradoxically, this anti-pragmatism makes it all the more fruitful. In one of his most important works, *Liturgy and Personality*, my husband showed how an appropriate attitude towards the liturgy allows the human soul to be transformed. Indeed, liturgy is so imbued with supernatural truth that, through it, man learns how to glorify God and, in doing so, becomes a "new creature." The immense spiritual benefits that liturgy offers us are not means to effect our transformation: this is an overflowing grace that flows from our participation in this divine nourishment.

The liturgy is imbued with the spirit of *discretio*: "It is the sense of distinction applied to the structure of the world. It is above all a specific sense that allows us to perceive and respect the structure and dramatic rhythm of being in preparation, ascension, fulfilment and decline" (*Liturgy and Personality*, p. 84). It is remarkable to note that, in the Tridentine liturgy, the celebrant first stands at the foot of the altar: this means that he needs to be purified before daring to ascend to the altar—which is not a table—on which the sacrifice of Calvary will be actualised in a bloodless manner. This is deeply symbolic, and symbols—most of which have been eliminated—have a profound religious significance. The entire structure of the Holy Mass is a perfect expression of this virtue: the respect that must be shown for the different stages that lead to the heart of the Mass: the consecration. It is like a symphony in which the different themes converge into a complete *present*, where time and eternity meet: *Hoc est enim corpus meum*.

Discretio is also a virtue that is completely ignored today. Most people do not know its meaning or are unaware of its importance. I am referring to the respect due to the different stages of it must be passed through in order to reach a sublime goal: our relationship with God and our neighbour. This deficiency is particularly evident in the United States and in English-speaking countries, which no longer distinguish between *formal* and *informal address*—a distinction that exists in French, German, Spanish, and Italian. It is not insignificant that when we meet someone for the first time, we address them formally, respecting the 'space' that separates human beings who do not yet know each other. As we get closer to the other person, the informal "tu" slowly matures

in our soul, and there comes a time when the formal "vous" would be inappropriate or artificial. In the United States, a regrettable attitude has developed in recent years: calling someone you don't know at all by their first name. Often, people call you on the phone—for example, to sell you something—and say, "I'd like to speak to John or Mary." When you ask them what they want, they reply that they are selling a new type of vacuum cleaner. This is a shocking lack of *discretion*.

And, unfortunately, this deplorable attitude is very often found in churches, even among priests; when talking about God, one will say, for example, "The nice guy who lives up there. " The angels must weep. How can one feel "awe and reverence" in a Catholic church where priests adopt this shocking familiarity, this vulgar way of speaking about the Creator of heaven and earth! The idea, it seems, is "to make people feel at home" in places of worship; but in fact, such behaviour prevents the soul from finding the path that will lead it *home*, to the dwelling that God has prepared *for it*. This distasteful familiarity has the effect of destroying man's reverence for the supernatural.

We all deplore the religious upheavals that have taken place in the wake of Vatican II. For forty years, our beloved Church has been shaken by scandals, betrayals, and heresies, many of which can be explained by the fact that many of our pastors have been unfaithful to the teaching of the Holy Church, have abandoned their life of prayer, and have been poisoned by secularism. But God never abandons his Church: signs of renewal are appearing. More and more green shoots are springing up in the desert in which we have been wandering for forty years. A particularly promising sign is the resurgence of the Tridentine liturgy, which for years was practically outlawed, and the fact that more and more young people are attending it to find spiritual nourishment. They find this nourishment in abundance in the liturgy. For in it, it is God himself who feeds his sheep: *Cibavit eos ex adipe frumenti, alleluia; et de petra melle saturavit eos, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia* (liturgy of Corpus Christi).

May the Holy Spirit inspire his children to rediscover the treasures contained in the liturgy and to nourish their souls with this sublime food. The world in which we live does not allow for optimism . On the contrary, now more than ever, it is a time for *hope*—that supernatural virtue that has always been the beacon of Christians. For "where sin abounds, grace abounds even more."