

Baltimore Catechism IV

Lesson 28 ON PRAYER

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Q. Is there any other means of obtaining God's grace than the Sacraments?

A. There is another means of obtaining God's grace, and it is prayer.

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Q. What is prayer?

A. Prayer is the lifting up of our minds and hearts to God to adore Him, to thank Him for His benefits, to ask His forgiveness, and to beg of Him all the graces we need whether for soul or body.

"Hearts," because the mere lifting up of the mind would not be prayer. One who blasphemes Him might also lift up his mind. We lift up the mind to know God and the heart to love Him, and in so doing we serve Him—the three things for which we were created. If we do not think of God we do not pray. A parrot might be taught to say the "Our Father," but it could never pray, because it has no mind to lift up. A phonograph can be made to say the prayers, but not to pray, for it has neither mind nor heart. So praying does not depend upon the words we say, but upon the way in which we say them. Indeed the best prayer, called meditation, is made when we do not speak at all, but simply think of God; of His goodness to us; of our sins against Him; of Hell, Purgatory, Heaven, death, judgment, of the end for which we were created, etc. This is the kind of prayer that priests and religious use most frequently. As you might like to meditate—for all who know how may meditate—let me

explain to you the method. First you try to remember that you are in the presence of God. Then you take some subject, say the Crucifixion, to think about. You try to make a picture of the scene in your own mind. You see Our Lord on the Cross; two thieves, one on each side of Him, the one praying to Our Lord and the other cursing Him. You see the multitude of His enemies mocking Him. Over at some distance you behold our Blessed Mother standing sorrowful with St. John and Mary Magdalen. Then you ask yourself—for you must imagine yourself there—to which side would you go. Over to our Blessed Mother to try and console her, or over to the enemies to help them to mock? Then you think how sin was the cause of all this suffering, and how often you yourself have sinned; how you have many a time gone over to the crowd and left the Blessed Mother. These thoughts will make you sorry for your sins, and you will form the good resolution never to sin again. You will thank God for these good thoughts and this resolution, and your meditation is ended. You can spend fifteen minutes, or longer if you wish, in such a meditation. The Crucifixion is only one of the many subjects you may select for meditation. You could take any part of the "Our Father," "Hail Mary," or "Creed," and even the questions in your Catechism. Mental prayer, therefore, is the best, because in it we must think; we must pay attention to what we are doing, and lift up our minds and hearts to God; while in vocal prayer—that is, the prayer we say aloud—we may repeat the words from pure habit, without any attention or lifting up of the mind or heart.

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Q. Is prayer necessary to salvation?

A. Prayer is necessary to salvation, and without it no one having the use of reason can be saved.

We mean here those who never pray during their whole lives, and not those who sometimes neglect their prayers through a kind of forgetfulness.

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Q. At what particular times should we pray?

A. We should pray particularly on Sundays and holy days, every morning and night, in all dangers, temptations, and afflictions.

"Sundays and holy days," because these are special days set apart by the Church for the worship of God. In the "morning" we ask God's grace that we may not sin during the day. At "night" we thank Him for all the benefits received during the day, and also that we may be protected while asleep from every danger and accident. We should never, if possible, go to sleep in mortal sin; and if we have the misfortune to be in that state, we should make as perfect an act of contrition as we can, and promise to go to confession as soon as possible. So many accidents happen that we are never safe, even in good health; fires, earthquakes, floods, lightning, etc., might take us off at any moment. If you saw a man hanging by a very slender thread over a great precipice where he would surely be dashed to pieces if the thread broke, and if you saw him thus risking his life willfully and without necessity, you would pronounce him the greatest fool in the world. One who commits sin is a greater fool. He suspends himself, as I have told you once before, over an abyss of eternal torments on the slender thread of his own life, that may break at any moment. Do we tempt God and do to Him what we dare not to do to our fellowman because He is so merciful? Let us be careful. He is as just as He is merciful, and some sin will be our last, and then He will cut the thread of life and allow us to fall into an eternity of sufferings. "Dangers," whether of soul or body. "Afflictions," sufferings or misfortunes of any kind; such as loss of health, death in the family, etc.

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Q. How should we pray?

A. We should pray: first, with attention; second, with a sense of our own helplessness and dependence upon God; third, with a great desire for the graces we beg of God; fourth, with trust in God's goodness; fifth, with perseverance.

"Attention," thinking of what we are going to do. Before praying we should think for a moment what prayer is. In it we are about to address Almighty God, our Creator, and we are going to ask Him for something—and what is the particular thing we need and seek for? No one would think of going to a store without first considering what he wanted to buy. He would make, too, all the necessary preparations for getting it. He would find out how much he wanted, and what it would cost, and bring with him sufficient money. He would never think of going in and telling the storekeeper to give him anything. Now it is the same in prayer. When we have thought of what we want of God, from whom we can obtain it, and of the reasons why we need it and why God might be pleased to grant it, we can then kneel down and pray for it. We should pray to God just as a child begs favors from its parents. We should talk to Him in our own simple words, and tell Him the reasons why we ask and why we think He should grant our request. We should, however, be humble and patient in all our prayers. God does not owe us anything, and whatever He gives is a free gift. We should not always read prayers at Almighty God. If you wanted anything very badly from a friend, you would know how to ask for it. You would never ask another to write out your request on paper, and then go and read it to your friend. Now, that is just what we do when we read the prayers that somebody else has written in a prayerbook. Try, therefore, to pray with your own prayers. Of course when the Church gives you certain prayers to say—as it does to its priests in the divine office—or recommends to you such prayers as the "Our Father," "Hail Mary," and "Creed," you should say them in preference to your own, because then the Church adds its petition to yours, and God is more likely to grant such prayers. I mean, therefore, that we should not always pray from prayerbooks, and hurry through the "Our Father" that we may give more time to some printed prayer that

pleases us. Our prayer should be a conversation with God. We should, after speaking to Him, listen to what He has to say to us, by our conscience, good thoughts, etc.

I must warn you against some prayers that have been circulated by impostors for the purpose of making money. They pretend that these prayers were found in some remarkable place or manner; that those who carry them or say them will have most wonderful advantages—they will never meet with accident; they will be warned of their death; they will go directly to Heaven after death, etc. If there were any such wonderful prayers the Church would surely know of them and commend them to its children. When you find any prayers of the kind I mention, bring them to the priest and ask his opinion before you use them yourself or give them to others. Never buy prayers or articles said to be blessed from persons unknown to you. Persons selling such things are frequently impostors, who by suave manners and pious speeches unfortunately find Catholics who believe them. These persons—sometimes not Catholics themselves, or at least very bad ones—laugh at the superstition and foolish practices of Catholics who believe everything they hear about pious books, prayers, or articles.

In the early ages of the Church, when the enemies of Christ found that they could not refute His teaching, they began to circulate foolish doctrines, pretending that they were taught by Christ, and thus they hoped to bring ridicule upon Christianity. So also in our time many things are circulated as the teaching of the Catholic Church by the enemies of the Church, in hopes that by these falsehoods and foolish doctrines they may bring disgrace and ridicule upon the true religion. Be on your guard against all impostors, remembering it is a safe rule never to buy a religious article from or give money to persons going about from door to door. If you have anything to give in alms, give it to some charitable institution or society connected with the Church, or put it in the poor-box, and then you will be sure it will do the good you intend. Remember, too, that all the religious articles carried about for sale do not

come from Rome or the Holy Land, and you are deceived if you think so, notwithstanding the assurance of their owners.

"A trust" — with full confidence that God will grant our petitions if we really need or deserve what we pray for. It is a fault with a great many to pray without the belief that their prayers will be answered. We should pray with such faith and confidence that we would really be disappointed if our prayer was not granted. Once when Our Lord was going about doing good, a poor woman who had been suffering for twelve years with a disease, and who, wishing to be healed, had uselessly spent all her money in seeking medical aid, came to follow Him. (Mark 5:25). She did not ask Him to cure her, but said within herself, "If I can but touch the hem of His garment I know I shall be healed." So she made her way through the throng and followed Our Lord till she could touch His garment without being seen. She succeeded in accomplishing her wishes, touched His garment, and was instantly cured. Our Lord knew her desires and what she had done, and turning around told the people, praising her great faith and confidence, on account of which He had healed her. Such also should be our confidence and trust when we pray to God for our needs.

"Perseverance." We should continue to pray though God does not grant our request. Have you ever noticed a little child begging favors from its mother? See its persistence! Though often refused, it will return again and again with the same request, till the mother, weary of its importunity, finally grants what it asks.

St. Monica prayed seventeen years for the conversion of her son St. Augustine. St. Augustine's father was a pagan, and Monica, his wife, prayed seventeen years for his conversion, and he became a Christian. Just about that time her son Augustine, who was attending school, fell in with bad companions and became a great sinner. She prayed seventeen years more for him, and he reformed, became a great saint and learned bishop in the Church. See, then, the result of thirty-four years' prayer:

Monica herself became a saint, her son became a saint, and her husband died a Christian. If St. Monica had ceased praying after ten years, Augustine might not have reformed. We never know when God is about to grant our petition, and we may cease to pray just when another appeal would obtain the object of our prayer. So we should continue to pray till God is pleased to grant our request. Some say their prayers are not heard when they mean to say their prayers are not granted; for God always hears us. But why does He not always grant our request? There are many reasons: (1) We may not pray in the proper manner, namely, with attention, reverence, humility, patience, and perseverance; (2) We may ask for things that God foresees will not be for our spiritual good. This is true even for things that seem good to us, such as the removal of an affliction, temptation, or the like. It often happens that God shows us His greatest mercy in not granting our prayers. Suppose, for example, a father held in his hand a bright and beautiful but very sharp instrument, for which his child continually asked. Do you believe the father would give it if he loved the child? Certainly not. The child thinks, no doubt, it would be benefitted by the possession of the instrument, but the father sees the danger. As God is our loving Father, He acts with us in the same manner. (3) Our prayers are not granted sometimes that we may learn to pray with proper dispositions, and God withholds what He intends finally to give, that we may persevere in prayer and have greater merit. Have you ever observed a mother teaching her child to walk? What does she do? She goes at some distance from the child and holds out an object that she knows will be pleasing to it, and thus tempts it to walk to her. When the child draws near she moves still farther away, and keeps it walking for some time before giving the object. This she does, not through unwillingness to give the article, but in order to teach the child to walk, for she loves to see its efforts. When it falls, she lifts it up and makes it try again. So, too, God teaches us to pray; and though He loves us, He withholds His gifts, that we may pray the longer, and thereby afford Him greater pleasure.

Q. Which are the prayers most recommended to us?

A. The prayers most recommended to us are the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, the Apostles' Creed, the Confiteor, and the Acts of Faith, Hope, Love, and Contrition.

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Q. Are prayers said with distractions of any avail?

A. Prayers said with willful distractions are of no avail.

"Distraction" — that is, when we willingly and knowingly think of something else while saying our prayers. It would be better not to pray than to pray with disrespect. If there is any time at which we cannot pray well, we should postpone our prayer: for God does not require us to say our prayers just at a particular time; but when we do pray, He requires us to pray with reverence and respect. We would pray well always if we reflected on the great privilege we enjoy in being allowed to pray.