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THE SAINTS CONVERSE WITH GOD

Pray without ceasing.—I Thess. v., 17

Of all the duties enjoined by Christianity none is more essential, and yet more neglected, than prayer. Most people consider this exercise a wearisome ceremony, which they are justified in abridging as much as possible. Even those whose profession or fears lead them to pray, do it with such languor and wanderings of mind that their prayers, far from drawing down blessings, only increase their condemnation. I wish to demonstrate, in this discourse, first, the general necessity of prayer; secondly, its peculiar duty; thirdly, the manner in which we ought to pray.

First. God alone can instruct us in our duty. The teachings of men, however wise and well disposed they may be, are still ineffectual, if God do not shed on the soul that light which opens the mind to truth. The imperfections of our fellow creatures cast a shade over the truths that we learn from them. Such is our weakness that we do not receive, with sufficient docility, the instructions of those who are as imperfect as ourselves. A thousand suspicions, jealousies, fears, and prejudices prevent us from profiting, as we might, by what we hear from men; and tho they announce the most serious truths, yet what they do weakens the effect of what they say. In a word, it is God alone who can perfectly teach us.

St. Bernard said, in writing to a pious friend—If you are seeking less to satisfy a vain curiosity than to get true wisdom, you will sooner find it in deserts than in books. The silence of the rocks and the pathless forests will teach you better than the eloquence of the most gifted men. “All,” says St. Augustine, “that we possess of truth and wisdom is a borrowed good flowing from that fountain for which we ought to thirst in the fearful desert of this world, that, being refreshed and invigorated by these dews from heaven, we may not faint upon the road that conducts us to a better country. Every attempt to satisfy the cravings of our hearts at other sources only increases the void. You will be always poor if you do not possess the only true riches.” All light that does not proceed from God is false; it only dazzles us; it sheds no illumination upon the difficult paths in which we must walk, along the precipices that are about us.

Our experience and our reflections can not, on all occasions, give us just and certain rules of conduct. The advice of our wisest, and most sincere friends is not always sufficient; many things escape their observation, and many that do not are too painful to be spoken. They suppress much from delicacy, or sometimes from a fear of transgressing the bounds that our friendship and confidence in them will allow. The animadversions of our enemies, however severe or vigilant they may be, fail to enlighten us with regard to ourselves. Their malignity furnishes our self-love with a pretext for the indulgence of the greatest faults. The blindness of our self-love is so great that we find reasons for being satisfied with ourselves, while all the world condemn us. What must we learn from all this darkness? That it is God alone who can dissipate it; that it is He alone whom we can never doubt; that He alone is true, and knoweth all things; that if we go to Him in sincerity, He will teach us what men dare not tell us, what books can not—all that is essential for us to know.

Be assured that the greatest obstacle to true wisdom is the self-confidence inspired by that which is false. The first step toward this precious knowledge is earnestly to desire it, to feel the want of it, and to be convinced that they who seek it must address themselves to the Father of lights, who freely gives to him who asks in faith. But if it be true that God alone can enlighten us, it is not the less true that He will do this simply in answer to our prayers. Are we not happy, indeed, in being able to obtain so great a blessing by only asking for it? No part of the effort that we make to acquire the transient enjoyments of this life is necessary to obtain these heavenly blessings. What will we not do, what are we not willing to suffer, to possess dangerous and contemptible things, and often without any success? It is not thus with heavenly things. God is always ready to grant them to those who make the request in sincerity and truth. The Christian life is a long and continual tendency of our hearts toward that eternal goodness which we desire on earth. All our happiness consists in thirsting for it. Now this thirst is prayer. Ever desire to approach your Creator and you will never cease to pray.

Do not think that it is necessary to pronounce many words. To pray is to say, Let Thy will be done. It is to form a

good purpose; to raise your heart to God; to lament your weakness; to sigh at the recollection of your frequent disobedience. This prayer demands neither method, nor science, nor reasoning; it is not essential to quit one's employment; it is a simple movement of the heart toward its Creator, and a desire that whatever you are doing you may do it to His glory. The best of all prayers is to act with a pure intention, and with a continual reference to the will of God. It depends much upon ourselves whether our prayers be efficacious. It is not by a miracle, but by a movement of the heart that we are benefited; by a submissive spirit. Let us believe, let us trust, let us hope, and God never will reject our prayer. Yet how many Christians do we see strangers to the privilege, aliens from God, who seldom think of Him, who never open their hearts to Him; who seek elsewhere the counsels of a false wisdom, and vain and dangerous consolations, who can not resolve to seek, in humble, fervent prayer to God, a remedy for their griefs and a true knowledge of their defects, the necessary power to conquer their vicious and perverse inclinations, and the consolations and assistance they require, that they may not be discouraged in a virtuous life.

But some will say, "I have no interest in prayer; it wearies me; my imagination is excited by sensible and more agreeable objects, and wanders in spite of me."

If neither your reverence for the great truths of religion, nor the majesty of the ever-present Deity, nor the interest of your eternal salvation, have power to arrest your mind and engage it in prayer, at least mourn with me for your infidelity; be ashamed of your weakness, and wish that your thoughts were more under your control; and desire to become less frivolous and inconstant. Make an effort to subject your mind to this discipline. You will gradually acquire habit and facility. What is now tedious will become delightful; and you will then feel, with a peace that the world can not give nor take away, that God is good. Make a courageous effort to overcome yourself. There can be no occasion that more demands it.

Secondly. The peculiar obligation of prayer. Were I to give all the proofs that the subject affords, I should describe every condition of life, that I might point out its dangers, and the necessity of recourse to God in prayer. But I will simply state that under all circumstances we have need of prayer. There is no situation in which it is possible to be placed where we have not many virtues to acquire and many faults to correct. We find in our temperament, or in our habits, or in the peculiar character of our minds, qualities that do not suit our occupations, and that oppose our duties. One person is connected by marriage to another whose temper is so unequal that life becomes a perpetual warfare. Some, who are exposed to the contagious atmosphere of the world, find themselves so susceptible to the vanity which they inhale that all their pure desires vanish. Others have solemnly promised to renounce their resentments, to conquer their aversions, to suffer with patience certain crosses, and to repress their eagerness for wealth; but nature prevails, and they are vindictive, violent, impatient, and avaricious.

Whence comes it that these resolutions are so frail? That all these people wish to improve, desire to perform their duty toward God and man better, and yet fail? It is because our own strength and wisdom, alone, are not enough. We undertake to do everything without God; therefore we do not succeed. It is at the foot of the altar that we must seek for counsel which will aid us. It is with God that we must lay our plans of virtue and usefulness; it is He alone that can render them successful. Without Him, all our designs, however good they may appear, are only temerity and delusion. Let us then pray that we may learn what we are and what we ought to be. By this means we shall not only learn the number and the evil effects of our peculiar faults, but we shall also learn to what virtues we are called, and the way to practise them. The rays of that pure and heavenly light that visit the humble soul will beam on us and we shall feel and understand that everything is possible to those who put their whole trust in God. Thus, not only to those who live in retirement, but to those who are exposed to the agitations of the world and the excitements of business, it is peculiarly necessary, by contemplation and fervent prayer, to restore their souls to that serenity which the dissipations of life and commerce with men have disturbed. To those who are engaged in business, contemplation and prayer are much more difficult than to those who live in retirement; but it is far more necessary for them to have frequent recourse to God in fervent prayer. In the most holy occupation a certain degree of precaution is necessary.

Do not devote all your time to action, but reserve a certain portion of it for meditation upon eternity. We see Jesus Christ inviting His disciples to go apart, in a desert place, and rest awhile, after their return from the cities, where they had been to announce His religion. How much more necessary is it for us to approach the source of all virtue, that we may revive our declining faith and charity, when we return from the busy scenes of life, where men

speak and act as if they had never known that there is a God! We should look upon prayer as the remedy for our weakness, the rectifier of our own faults. He who was without sin prayed constantly; how much more ought we, who are sinners, to be faithful in prayer!

Even the exercise of charity is often a snare to us. It calls us to certain occupations that dissipate the mind, and that may degenerate into mere amusement. It is for this reason that St. Chrysostom says that nothing is so important as to keep an exact proportion between the interior source of virtue and the external practise of it; else, like the foolish virgins, we shall find that the oil in our lamp is exhausted when the bridegroom comes.

The necessity we feel that God should bless our labors is another powerful motive to prayer. It often happens that all human help is vain. It is God alone that can aid us, and it does not require much faith to believe that it is less our exertions, our foresight, and our industry than the blessing of the Almighty that can give success to our wishes.

Thirdly. Of the manner in which we ought to pray. 1. We must pray with attention. God listens to the voice of the heart, not to that of the lips. Our whole heart must be engaged in prayer. It must fasten upon what it prays for; and every human object must disappear from our minds. To whom should we speak with attention if not to God? Can He demand less of us than that we should think of what we say to Him? Dare we hope that He will listen to us, and think of us, when we forget ourselves in the midst of our prayers? This attention to prayer, which it is so just to exact from Christians, may be practised with less difficulty than we imagine. It is true that the most faithful souls suffer from occasional involuntary distractions. They can not always control their imaginations, and, in the silence of their spirits, enter into the presence of God. But these unbidden wanderings of the mind ought not to trouble us; and they may conduce to our perfection even more than the most sublime and affecting prayers if we earnestly strive to overcome them, and submit with humility to this experience of our infirmity. But to dwell willingly on frivolous and worldly things during prayer, to make no effort to check the vain thoughts that intrude upon this sacred employment and come between us and the Father of our spirits—is not this choosing to live the sport of our senses, and separated from God?

2. We must also ask with faith; a faith so firm that it never falters. He who prays without confidence can not hope that his prayer will be granted. Will not God love the heart that trusts in Him? Will He reject those who bring all their treasures to Him, and repose everything upon His goodness? When we pray to God, says St. Cyprian, with entire assurance, it is Himself who has given us the spirit of our prayer. Then it is the Father listening to the words of His child; it is He who dwells in our hearts, teaching us to pray. But must we confess that this filial confidence is wanting in all our prayers? Is not prayer our resource only when all others have failed us? If we look into hearts, shall we not find that we ask of God as if we had never before received benefits from Him? Shall we not discover there a secret infidelity that renders us unworthy of His goodness? Let us tremble, lest, when Jesus Christ shall judge us, He pronounce the same reproach that He did to Peter, "O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?"

3. We must join humility with trust. Great God, said Daniel, when we prostrate ourselves at Thy feet, we do not place our hopes for the success of our prayers upon our righteousness, but upon Thy mercy. Without this disposition in our hearts, all others, however pious they may be, can not please God. St. Augustine observes that the failure of Peter should not be attributed to insincerity in his zeal for Jesus Christ. He loved his Master in good faith; in good faith he would rather have died than have forsaken Him; but his fault lay in trusting to his own strength, to do what his own heart dictated.

It is not enough to possess a right spirit, an exact knowledge of duty, a sincere desire to perform it. We must continually renew this desire, and enkindle this flame within us, at the fountain of pure and eternal light.

It is the humble and contrite heart that God will not despise. Remark the difference which the evangelist has pointed out between the prayer of the proud and presumptuous Pharisee and the humble and penitent publican. The one relates his virtues, the other deplors his sins. The good works of the one shall be set aside, while the penitence of the other shall be accepted. It will be thus with many Christians. Sinners, vile in their own eyes, will be objects of the mercy of God; while some, who have made professions of piety, will be condemned on account of the pride and arrogance that have contaminated their good works. It will be so because these have said in their

hearts, "Lord, I thank thee that I am not as other men are." They imagine themselves privileged; they pretend that they alone have penetrated the mysteries of the kingdom of God; they have a language and science of their own; they believe that their zeal can accomplish everything. Their regular lives favor their vanity; but in truth they are incapable of self-sacrifice, and they go to their devotions with their hearts full of pride and presumption. Unhappy are those who pray in this manner! Unhappy are those whose prayers do not render them more humble, more submissive, more watchful over their faults, and more willing to live in obscurity!

4. We must pray with love. It is love says St. Augustine, that asks, that seeks, that knocks, that finds, and that is faithful to what it finds. We cease to pray to God as soon as we cease to love Him, as soon as we cease to thirst for His perfections. The coldness of our love is the silence of our hearts toward God. Without this we may pronounce prayers, but we do not pray; for what shall lead us to meditate upon the laws of God if it be not the love of Him who has made these laws? Let our hearts be full of love, then, and they will pray. Happy are they who think seriously of the truths of religion; but far more happy are they who feel and love them! We must ardently desire that God will grant us spiritual blessings; and the ardor of our wishes must render us fit to receive the blessings. For if we pray only from custom, from fear, in the time of tribulation— if we honor God only with our lips, while our hearts are far from Him—if we do not feel a strong desire for the success of our prayers—if we feel a chilling indifference in approaching Him who is a consuming fire—if we have no zeal for His glory—if we do not feel hatred for sin, and a thirst for perfection, we can not hope for a blessing upon such heartless prayers.

5. We must pray with perseverance. The perfect heart is never weary of seeking God. Ought we to complain if God sometimes leaves us to obscurity, and doubt, and temptation? Trials purify humble souls, and they serve to expiate the faults of the unfaithful. They confound those who, even in their prayers, have flattered their cowardice and pride. If an innocent soul, devoted to God, suffer from any secret disturbance, it should be humble, adore the designs of God, and redouble its prayers and its fervor. How often do we hear those who every day have to reproach themselves with unfaithfulness toward God complain that He refuses to answer their prayers! Ought they not to acknowledge that it is their sins which have formed a thick cloud between Heaven and them, and that God has justly hidden Himself from them? How often has He recalled us from our wanderings! How often, ungrateful as we are, have we been deaf to His voice and insensible to His goodness! He would make us feel that we are blind and miserable when we forsake Him. He would teach us, by privation, the value of the blessings that we have slighted. And shall we not bear our punishment with patience? Who can boast of having done all that he ought to have done; of having repaired all his past errors; of having purified his heart, so that he may claim as a right that God should listen to his prayer? Most truly, all our pride, great as it is, would not be sufficient to inspire such presumption! If then, the Almighty do not grant our petitions, let us adore His justice, let us be silent, let us humble ourselves, and let us pray without ceasing. This humble perseverance will obtain from Him what we should never obtain by our own merit. It will make us pass happily from darkness to light; for know, says St. Augustine that God is near to us even when He appears far from us.

6. We should pray with a pure intention. We should not mingle in our prayers what is false with what is real; what is perishable with what is eternal; low and temporal interests with that which concerns our salvation. Do not seek to render God the protector of your self-love and ambition, but the promoter of your good desires. You ask for the gratification of your passions, or to be delivered from the cross, of which He knows you have need. Carry not to the foot of the altar irregular desires and indiscreet prayers. Sigh not for vain and fleeting pleasures. Open your heart to your Father in heaven, that His Spirit may enable you to ask for the true riches. How can He grant you, says St. Augustine, what you do not yourself desire to receive? You pray every day that His will may be done, and that His kingdom may come. How can you utter this prayer with sincerity when you prefer your own will to His, and make His law yield to the vain pretexts with which your self-love seeks to elude it? Can you make this prayer—you who disturb His reign in your heart by so many impure and vain desires? You, in fine, who fear the coming of His reign, and do not desire that God should grant what you seem to pray for? No! If He, at this moment, were to offer to give you a new heart, and render you humble, and willing to bear the cross, your pride would revolt, and you would not accept the offer; or you would make a reservation in favor of your ruling passion, and try to accommodate your piety to your humor and fancies!

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